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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 54, No. 2 APRIL, 1954

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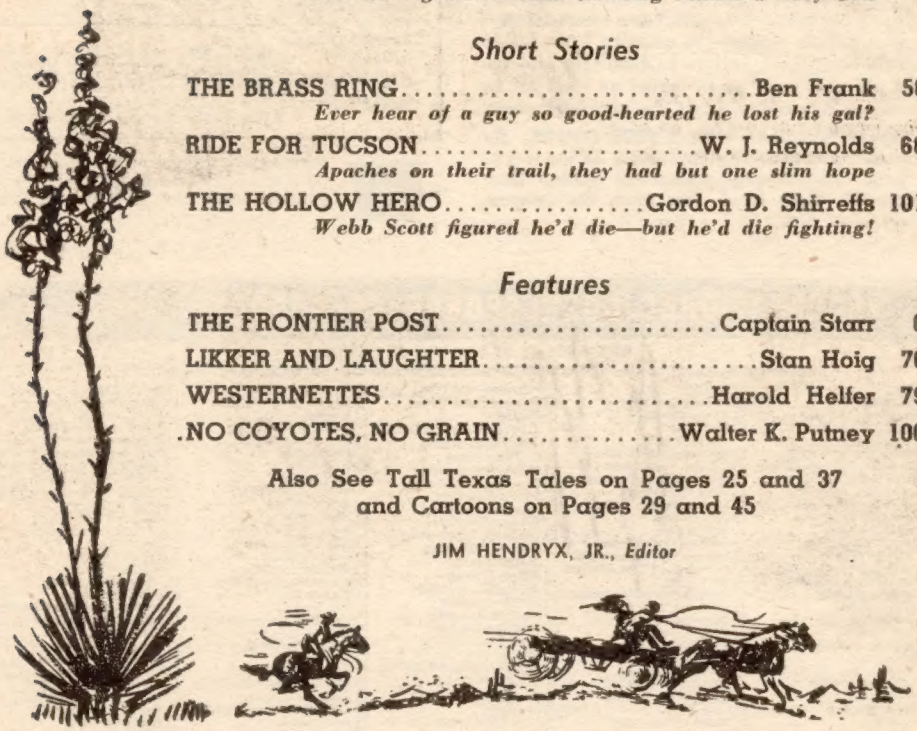
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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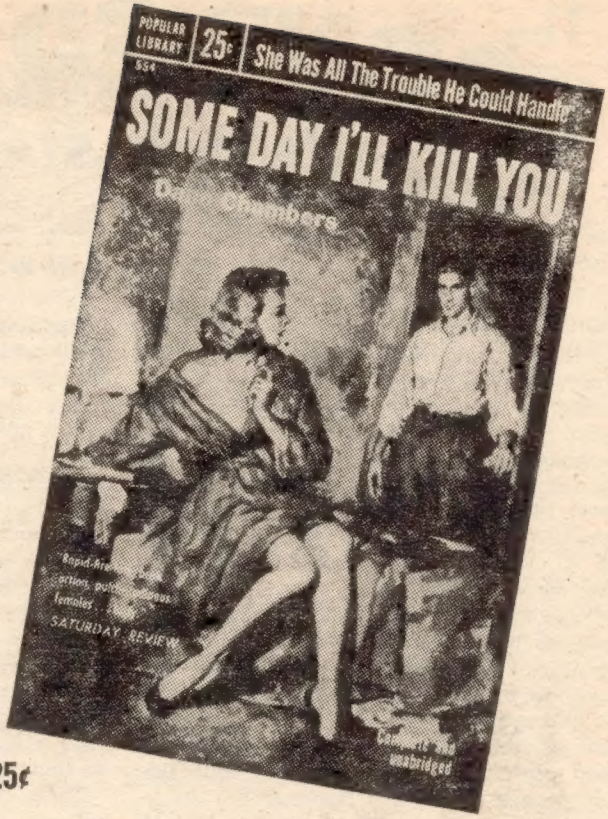

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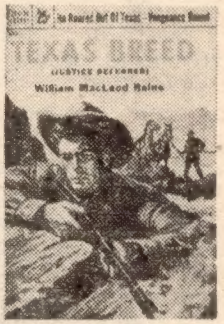

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The West Is Still Wild

FOR seven weeks I camped out last summer in a National Forest, associating with chipmunks, chickadees and an occasional passing Ranger. It was one of the richest experiences I've had in years.

I came away convinced that the West is still wild. There are statistics to prove it. About 14 million acres remain in the same primitive state as when the first settlers saw it. What's more, those 77 wilderness areas of 5000 acres and upwards will stay that way so long as the U. S. Forest Service continues to hold out against the clamoring commercial interests that hanker to "improve" them with jukebox joints and other tourist traps.

Our Forest Service operates mainly to guard our future lumber supply, but the multiple use of our 150 National Forests is increasing at a great rate. Last year 20-odd million visitors came to picnic, fish, hunt, camp, ski, swim, hike, ride or just plain loaf, like I did.

That figure gives you some idea of the recreational demands.

A Big Business

The National Forests are entirely separate from our National Parks that contain our outstanding scenic wonderlands, though both are branches of the Department of Agriculture. The Park Service is strictly a recreational set-up. The Forest Service is a business with a 30-million yearly income.

This income consists of fees paid by logging outfits, grazers and others, making the USFS the only profit-yielding agency in the government.

What becomes of the money? One-fourth goes to the States and counties in which the forest areas lie. One-tenth is used for roads and trails. Strange as it seems, only an insignificant trickle goes to recreation needs.

Just to give you an idea, only $3000 a year is allowed to maintain campgrounds, wildlife, fisheries and conservation in one immense National Forest in Oregon, though it yields millions in logging fees. This is a favorite vacationland. But the beautiful campgrounds and picnic areas created 15 years ago by the boys of the Civilian Conservation Corps are in a shocking state of neglect.

In the San Bernardino National Forest of California, where crowds swarm summer and winter, a puny $300 a year is allowed to maintain a popular campground where on one holiday weekend I counted 125 campers! The $300 isn't enough to pay employees to dig needed garbage pits, so county prisoners do that and other maintenance work.

There's a bill pigeonholed in Congress providing a percentage of the Forest Service's 30-million take for recreational requirements.

If enough outdoor groups such as the Isaak Walton League, the Audubon Society, the Boy Scouts, church groups and ski clubs get behind that bill, the situation will improve. Only the heroic shift of funds and forces by hard-driven foresters have kept the program from going completely to pot already. Often you see highly-trained fire patrol crews cleaning up campgrounds.

Camping Out

Lots more folks camp out than used to, Fire Patrol Foreman W. T. Stephenson told me. The reason? The five-day week, which gives workers more time for family outings.

An entry fee is charged at National Parks but National Forests are open to all who come to enjoy them. The Forest Service emblem is a pine tree centered on a shield and the Service has a system of blazemarks on tree trunks to mark dim, little-used trails. Those and many other signs you learn to read

when you live in the wilderness.

The 179 million acres of National Forest provide an acre apiece and then some for every man, woman and child in our country. But only about one in 10 yearly get to visit. But about 75 percent of big game animals remaining in the West make the National Forests at least their part-time home. Besides those, some 15 million head of domestic livestock range them in season.

Solitary Lives

My seven weeks "where the Indian saw God in the clouds and heard Him in the wind" was longer than most folks can manage, except cowboys and sheepherders who spend all summer in camp.

Yet their solitary lives are less lonely than that of the Forest Service fire lookout.

This remarkable fellow is as isolated as any lighthouse keeper. He lives in an observation tower on a mountaintop that commands a vast view of timberland. All through the long hours of summer daylight he keeps an eye peeled for smoke or other fire sign and has instruments to tell the range and bearing—direction and distance—of a blaze. He reports to district headquarters by FS telephone line or more likely by walkie-talkie, the radiophone system now in wide use.

When the poor fellow runs out of grub, he has to hike down the mountain for more, then scram back up to his lookout perch packing the supplies on his back. Usually he has to pack water as well.

The job lasts throughout the fire season, about four months as a rule, and it's a 24-hour duty. I knew a lookout stationed on a lava butte in the Cascades who reported 22 spotfires one night after an electrical storm.

The Peril of Lightning

Lightning is a dreaded enemy of fire crews. A bolt struck near my camp one midnight, with a force that jarred me a foot off the ground.

It set an old pine snag afire, which a lookout spotted. Soon the firefighters arrived and outened it before it spread.

Most of that crack crew were Indians. One of them, later that night, hoofed eight miles over practically impassable country, carrying a power saw, gasoline and other tools and supplies to reach another lightning fire.

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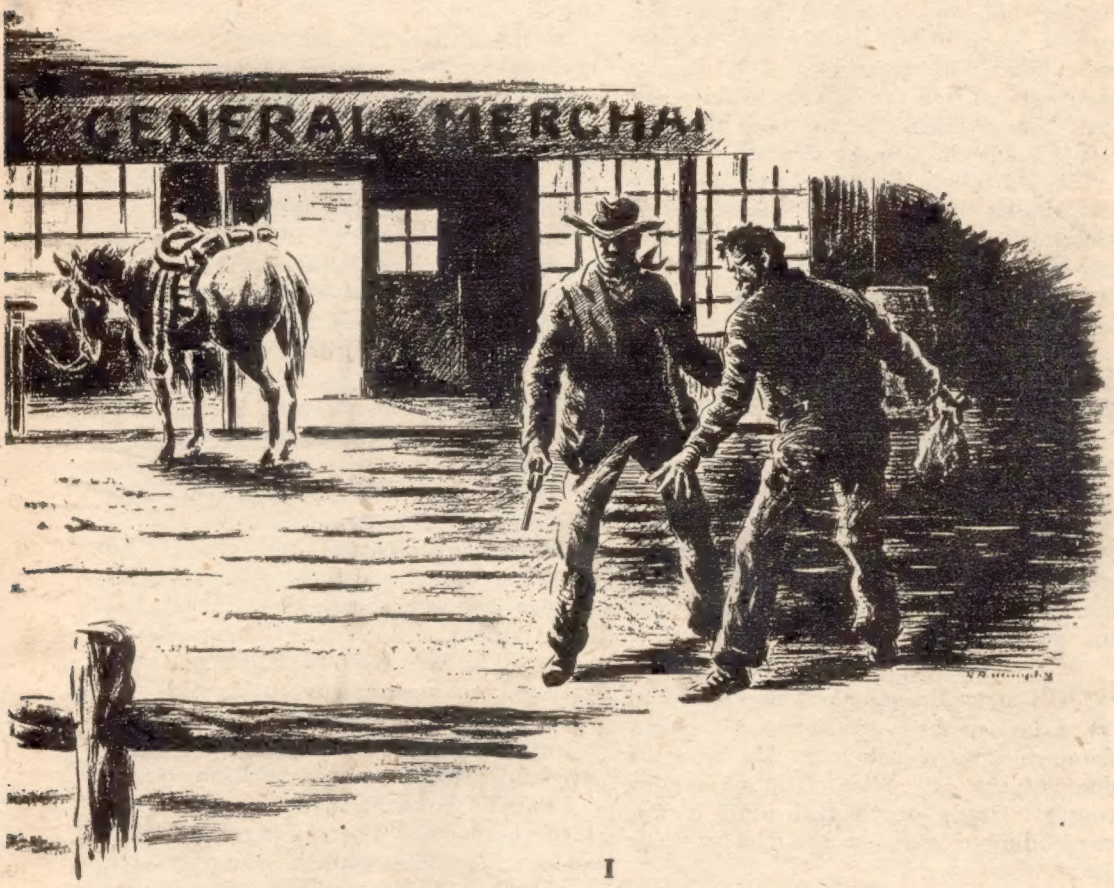
The Lone Wolf soon found out just how weird and dangerous was this case of fake gold coins and a sixgun that would fire seven times

BULLET

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE



I

FROM the doorway of the county jail office in Madero a clash of angry voices aroused disturbing echoes through the siesta-hour hush of this west-Texas cowtown. To the tall young stranger just dismounting from a sorrel stallion at the jail hitchrack, it sounded like a domestic argument. At least the voices were those of a man and a woman.

The stranger half-hitched his reins over the cottonwood bar, hooked an oxbow stirrup over saddle-horn and loosened the cinch. The golden sheen of his mount's coat was tarnished with accumulated layers of alkali and lava dust; the pads of lather which creamed the sorrel's heaving flanks told of a long hot trail behind this rider's arrival in Madero.

In the shade of the jail porch roof a whisky-bloated old man was loafing, giving the rider his heavy-lidded attention as the man crossed the spur-scuffed plank sidewalk and began to swat dust off his bullhide chaps with an equally dusty flat-

crowned stetson. This stranger was a solid-built, whang-lean six-footer, and the day's heat had heightened the color of his weather-bronzed cheeks.

His rig was too neat for him to be tabbed as a saddle bum. Nor did he seem to belong to the owlhoot breed who frequently passed through Madero en route to the Border. He wore matching Colts, and the leather loops of his double gun harness were filled with cartridges. This display of armament told the curious loafer nothing. The average Texan toted at least one .45, this close to the Border.

The old fellow glanced up to meet the level strike of the stranger's green eyes. Merriment was dancing in them as the rider jerked his head in the direction of the sheriff's office where arguing continued unabated.

"That'll be Sheriff M. M. Miles in yonder, amigo?" he wanted to know, interrupting the loafer's patient stick-whittling.

The barfly spat tobacco juice into the dust, snapped shut his jackknife and nodded. "Sheriff's fixing to get married come fall, and they seems to be a difference of opinion as to whether it's safe for a newlywed to pack a tin star. They fuss like this every time they get together, Mary and the groom-to-be."

THE stranger adjusted his stetson at a jack-deuce angle across his sweat-dampened, coal-black hair. He eyed the door of the jail office. The quarreling couple's tirade overlapped until it was impossible to pick up the gist of their differences.

"Serves the girl right," the stranger chuckled, "falling in love with a sheriff in the first place. If that badge-toter is wise he'll stick by his guns. Otherwise he'll have to find a new job before the ink's dry on his wedding certificate."

The old fellow chuckled, too. "If you're figuring on going in there, feller," he advised, "better toss your hat in ahead of your shadow. When Mary and her feller get squared off like this, assorted ob-jeks is liable to start flying, innocent bystanders to the contrary notwithstanding."

The stranger hitched his gunbelts, mentally bracing himself to dodge any hurtling bludgeons, trailed his spurs up the steps, and halted discreetly on the threshold. His eyes, narrowed to slits by the beating sunlight outside, focused on the young couple who stood in the center of the office floor, outthrust chins almost touching.

At the stranger's loud cough, the belligerents broke off their verbal duel and wheeled, to stare at the doorway. The girl combatant was not far past twenty and her bibless levis, spurred cowboots and man's shirt failed to conceal the lush young maturity of her body.

Her opponent was a sandy-haired, freckled man close to thirty, his anger-brightened eyes a shade deeper blue than the girl's. Fists planted akimbo over shell belts he snapped impatiently at the stranger in the doorway:

"Well, what do you want? Can't you see I got my hands full taming this—this she-tiger?"

The stranger doffed his stetson and suppressed a grin.

"Sorry to interrupt the music," he drawled, "but I've ridden a far piece to have a few words with you, Sheriff. I'm Jim Hatfield, of the Texas Rangers. Reckon you'll be Sheriff M. M. Miles, who telegraphed our headquarters in Austin?"

He stepped into the office and held out a rope-callused hand. The young man accepting Hatfield's grip, said lamely:

"*I* ain't the sheriff, feller. I'm just a two-bit freighter who's honing to commit matrimony. Del Prescott's the name."

Hatfield colored. "The old gaffer outside gave me a bum tip, then. He said the sheriff was in here. Sorry to intrude."

Del Prescott jerked his head in the direction of the girl, who had seated herself in a Douglas chair in front of a littered roll-top desk, her arms folded across her breasts.

"*There's* the sheriff, Hatfield," Prescott said. "M. M. Miles, in person. And I'm warning you in advance, she's the most bull-headed, mule-stubborn shemale in this corner of Texas."

Jim Hatfield's jaw dropped in amazement. For the first time, he spotted the five-pointed silver star pinned to the girl's shirt. For the first time, he also noticed that she wore a staghorn-butted Colt .45 at either hip, and that she had the determined jaw, eyes and freckled nose that went with a person well-versed in how to use those guns.

"*You're* the sheriff?" Hatfield blurted. Was this Prescott ribbing him? "A girl—

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

riding herd on a town as wild and woolly as Madero?"

She came to her feet, anger still staining her cheeks.

"I am Sheriff M. M. Miles," she snapped defiantly. "The initials stand for Mary Martha. I suppose, being a man, you are going to side with Del there, and try to tell me that petticoats don't belong on a law enforcement officer!"

Hatfield colored, confusion rendering him speechless for the moment. He turned helplessly to Del Prescott, who was fishing out Durham sack and book of papers preparatory to twisting a smoke. Prescott shrugged, avoiding Hatfield's stare.

"Ain't it ridiculous?" he demanded. "How would you feel, Hatfield, if you were engaged to marry a girl—a sweet, feminine girl, as you can see—and then see her run for sheriff and get elected to boot? Why, it would make me the laughing-stock of Catclaw County if I led a *sheriff* to the altar!"

THE humor of it had finally filtered through the Ranger's reluctance to believe Mary Miles' official status. Then, remembering the grim reasons for his being in Madero, the smile faded from Jim Hatfield's lips. He turned back to her and asked:

"Are you the sheriff who jailed that counterfeit smuggler, ma'am—to crack a case that has had the U. S. Border patrolmen buffaloed for years?"

Mary Martha Miles nodded stiffly, gesturing toward the massive door leading from her office to the cell block in the rear.

"I have had Jeb Musto in custody for a week," she replied coldly. "I caught him with the goods—twenty-five hundred dollars in bogus gold coin. He's cooling his heels in my bullpen right now."

Hatfield scratched his jaw thoughtfully, still unable to get it through his head that this uncommonly pretty girl with the corn-yellow hair tumbling to her shoulders could actually be a Texas sheriff.

"Well," he said finally, "I'm here to take charge of your counterfeiter, ma'am. I'm to take Musto and the evidence back to Austin—direct orders from Captain Bill McDowell."

She seemed to relax. But she only glanced past Hatfield to stare at her fiancé and remark coolly:

"I believe you're overdue, taking your wagons to the Rio Grande, Del. Don't let my discussing business with a Texas Ranger detain you."

Embarrassment turned Prescott's cheeks scarlet as he reached to a deerhorn rack and yanked down a shapeless stetson.

"You know as well as I do," he retorted, "that I don't travel during the heat of the day." Moving toward the door he glanced toward Hatfield and said, "You better make good and sure he *is* a Ranger, honey, before you go unlock Musto's cell."

He stalked out the door, slamming it noisily behind him.

Mary Miles waved Hatfield toward a chair, wearily. "Why is it," she demanded, "that you men can't stand to see a girl doing a man's job? Why shouldn't I hold down the sheriff's office? The voters elected me fair and square."

A grin broke through the harsh lines of fatigue which rutted the Ranger's face.

"Count me out of your personal problems, Sheriff," he chuckled. "I came here to pick up a criminal. That's headache enough for me."

Mary Miles stared doubtfully at her handsome visitor. Finally she said, "Del's right—I can't surrender my prisoner until I'm sure you're a Ranger. What did you say your brand was?"

"Hatfield. Jim Hatfield."

A glimmer of excitement touched the girl's eyes. "Not the famous Lone Wolf?" So that sobriquet had percolated to this girl sheriff's ears, too!

Hatfield nodded. "They've tacked that nickname onto me—at least Cap'n Bill McDowell did, long time ago. Reckon he did it because I do usually work alone on assignments, but the name don't mean I do all the time—not by a heap. I've got some pretty good saddle pards who have helped crack cases when it was plain I'd be hopelessly outnumbered. The reason Cap'n Bill sent me here this time to pick up your counterfeiter, was because I happened to be working on a case over in Marfa. That made me the closest Ranger he could spare."

Mary's fingers drummed on the arm of her chair. She said, "A pity Texas Rangers don't wear uniforms. You could be any rambling cowhand, you know. Can you identify yourself?"

Hatfield rummaged in a pocket of his chaps and drew out his Ranger badge—a silver star enclosed in a silver circle. But Madero's girl sheriff shook her head.

"Anybody," she pointed out, "could steal a Ranger's emblem. I can't turn Musto over to you on the strength of a tin star, Señor Hatfield."

"Good girl." The Lone Wolf unbuttoned the flap of his shirt pocket and located a folded telegraph flimsy. "This was the message that brought me across country from Marfa, Sheriff." He passed the telegram to the girl. "Aside from what Cap'n Bill said in that message, I know nothing about the case."

MARY MILES'S lips moved soundlessly as she read Hatfield's telegram to herself:

> SHERIFF M. M. MILES OF MADERO, CATCLAW COUNTY, HAS IN CUSTODY ONE JEB MUSTO, BELIEVED TO BE A MEMBER OF THE GOLD EAGLE COUNTERFEIT SMUGGLING GANG. REPORT TO MILES AND TAKE MUSTO INTO CUSTODY AND RETURN WITH PRISONER TO AUSTIN WITHOUT DELAY. COULD BE THE BREAK WE'VE BEEN HUNTING FOR TEN YEARS.

"I'm sorry," Mary said stubbornly, "but *this* doesn't prove anything, either. How do I know you aren't a gunman who tangled with Hatfield on the way here, a friend of Musto's perhaps. You could have murdered Hatfield and stolen this telegram."

Hatfield laughed. "You'll do to ride the river with, Sheriff. You ain't taking any chances. All I can do now is have you wire Cap'n Bill in Austin to double-check on my identity."

Mary Miles handed the telegram to Hatfield and came to her feet, reaching in a desk drawer to pull out a ring of keys.

"Your Cap'n Bill—Roaring Bill we call him here, like nearly everybody else in Texas—telegraphed me yesterday," she said. "I'm to ask you to give the name of his maiden aunt who lives in Corpus Christi. No impostor would have that information."

Hatfield's cheeks ballooned with relief. "Might have known he wouldn't leave me out or a limb," he said. "His aunt's name

—believe it or not—is Prunella Cheeverton."

Mary threw her head back and laughed as she extended a hand to her visitor. "Dear old Aunt Prunella," she said. "I still don't believe anyone would tack such a fantastic name on anyone else." Quickly sobering, she went on, "You'll want to see the prisoner, of course, and question him. You won't find out much. Musto won't talk. Except to boast that I'll never turn him over to the Rangers. I took that seriously enough to put a night-and-day guard over him. If he's a smuggler, he'll have plenty of friends who are in the same boat with him."

Hatfield said, "When I put Musto aboard a train tonight your responsibility will be over, Sheriff Miles."

"Call me Mary—everyone else does." The girl smiled. "I'm not quite as much of a shrew as my huffy-tempered future husband may have led you to believe. I'm just a gal doing a man's job—and I intend to keep on doing it until I finish the job my father started. This is his badge I'm wearing, you know."

"Your father's badge? No, I didn't know that. Is he—"

Mary's eyes clouded with bitter memories. "Dad was Sheriff of Catclaw County for over twenty years, Hatfield—and I'm going to call you Jim since you're to call me Mary. One night last March—he had been working on the Gold Eagle smuggling, I knew, though he said nothing about it, and I knew the ring was a big one—he came stumbling into the house just as I was getting ready for bed. He had been shot in the chest. He had time to gasp out only five words before he died in my arms. 'Musto shot me—corral post—' "

Hatfield scowled, a disturbing thought occurring to him.

"Are those the grounds you arrested Musto on—your father's unwitnessed testimony? If so, in court your word against Musto's could be disallowed. Your father might have been delirious."

Mary went on quietly, "A month after Dad was buried the county held a special election to replace him. I filed as a candidate, because I can ride and shoot as well as almost any man. What I wanted to do was to trap Jeb Musto, make him pay for killing my father, though I knew that would take time. When Del Prescott heard I had actually been elected sheriff he threatened to break our engagement. His masculine sense of superiority was terribly offended. Oh, sure, I knew then that the votes I got were intended as a tribute to Dad's memory. No one actually thought I'd get a majority—but I did. And I've sworn an oath to myself, Jim—not to quit, not to turn in my badge until I've seen Musto hang for Dad's murder."

Hatfield rolled a smoke and lighted it, giving himself a chance to think. Finally he asked, "How did you go about putting Musto in jail? And just who is Musto, anyway?"

Catclaw County's incredible sheriff smiled wearily. "I kept Dad's secret, what he said to me. I didn't know why Musto shot him, or where, since Dad hadn't told me whether Musto was even suspected of being connected with the smuggling or not. Musto is a blacksmith for the Lepperd Freight Lines — keeps Lepperd's wagons in repair, here in Madero. Lepperd is an importer and freight line owner who hauls wool and hides and such from Rio Vista, down on the Rio Grande, over to San Antonio and up into New Mexico as far as Albuquerque."

HATFIELD nodded thoughtfully. "I've heard of Lepperd's outfit for years," he admitted. You think that in addition to his legitimate freighting out of Mexico, Lepperd might be running contraband past the Border Customs guards?"

Mary shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Raoul Lepperd does run a legitimate business. He is Del's chief competitor in this end of Texas. But I do know now that his blacksmith here in Madero is in with that smuggling ring. That's why I arrested him—not because my father's dying words accused Musto as his killer. I haven't even mentioned that to the prisoner."

Hatfield gave her his rapt attention as she went on to describe her long weeks and months of playing a waiting game, spying on Jeb Musto's activities. Her father's cryptic reference to a "corral post" had finally been the means of Musto's undoing.

"In mentioning a corral post," Mary said, "he could only have referred to the Lepperd Freight Company's corral where they keep their extra stock—behind Musto's blacksmith shop here in Madero. After dark, nights, I used to keep track of what Musto was doing. One night about ten days ago I saw Musto slip out of the shop and pull a snubbing post out of one corner of the corral."

"Musto pulled a snubbing post out of the ground?"

"It was just propped in a hole in the adobe, of course. I waited to see what he was up to, and I saw him hide something in that posthole, drop the post back on it, and head for his favorite saloon."

Hatfield grinned. "So you had a look under that post?"

Mary Miles moved over to her office safe, opened it, and drew out a canvas sack, obviously heavy. Opening it, she gave Hatfield a glimpse of its contents—shiny ten-dollar gold coins, as fresh as if they had just come from the U.S. Mint.

"They're counterfeit," she said. "The banker here confirmed that, and said they are identical to those in the flood of bogus double eagles that has had the U. S. Treasury Department frantic for several years."

"The Gold Eagle smuggling ring," Hatfield whispered. "Mary, you've got something all right. This is no wild-goose chase."

She restored the bag to her safe, then, turning back to Hatfield, she said:

"I arrested Musto that same night, and wired the headquarters of the Texas Rangers, knowing the case was too big for any county sheriff to handle. Jim"—her voice broke then—"I think Musto shot Dad that night because Dad caught him red-handed caching counterfeit money under that snubbing post. Dad must have had reason to believe Musto is an outlaw."

"Yes," Hatfield agreed. "And one of an organized bunch of outlaws at that. The Gold Eagle gang has smuggled nearly a million dollars' worth of counterfeit gold ten-dollar pieces into this country that the Government knows of. Jeb Musto is probably just a cog in a big wheel, but as Cap'n Bill says, this may be the break the law has been looking for. I think, Sheriff Mary Martha Miles, you've won yourself a page in history."

II

PRESCOTT was sulking in the shade of the jailhouse awning when Mary and Ranger Jim Hatfield emerged from the office. After a glance up and down the empty street to make sure she would not be overheard, the girl said:

"Jim here has been in saddle since yesterday sundown, Del. He won't be taking Musto away until the east-bound express pulls in at nine o'clock tonight. How about letting him bunk at your place and catch up on his shut-eye this afternoon?"

Prescott came wearily to his feet, humiliation still showing in his handsome, almost boyish features.

"Sure thing." He grinned. "Anything I can do to hurry this business along and get you back into a housewife's skirts—"

Mary cut in aloofly, "That won't happen until after Musto's trial at the state capitol. After all, I'm the key witness for the prosecution."

Prescott's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You mean you're going back to Austin with Hatfield on tonight's train, honey?"

Hatfield laughed. "Justice doesn't move quite that fast in Texas courts, Del," he reassured the freighter. "By the time Musto's case comes before a judge and jury, you and Mary will probably be man and wife."

Prescott waited until Hatfield had unhitched Goldy, the big sorrel whose grooming and graining was Hatfield's first consideration, now that he faced a long afternoon of leisure here in Madero before train time.

Then Prescott said, "You're welcome to

stable your bronc at my barn, Hatfield. How are you going to ship him to Austin?"

"I'm not—I'm coming back here as soon as I've delivered Mary's prisoner in Austin," Hatfield explained, as they set off in the direction of Prescott's wagon yard on the outskirts of town. "I'd like to leave Goldy in your keeping, if you have stable room."

"Sure." Prescott's voice had lost its truculence now. "But I'd like to steal that bronc myself."

His freight headquarters were right beside the more pretentious barns, corrals and storage warehouses of his business competitor, the Lepperd Freight Company. Sandwiched between the rival firms was a blacksmith shop, now padlocked, with Jeb Musto's name on its clapboard front. Musto's small corral, for holding stock he might be shoeing, was therefore the one where Mary Martha's father, Sheriff Rocky Miles, had discovered the blacksmith's gold cache.

With Goldy taken care of, Hatfield visited the Southern Pacific depot and purchased a round-trip ticket to Austin for himself and a one-way for his prisoner. When they were on their way back to Prescott's living quarters behind the freight yard, Prescott asked curiously:

"You think Mary's got enough on Musto to hang him, Hatfield?"

The Ranger said candidly, "I doubt it. All she's got is a dead man's testimony which she can't verify. But don't worry. A counterfeiting conviction can send him to Leavenworth for a long stretch. Then Mary will be free to resign her law job and marry you."

Prescott led his guest into his board-and-bat shack and indicated a neatly-made-up bunk in one corner.

"I'm ready to admit Mary's justified in wearing that star—and that she's as good as any man for the office," he admitted ruefully. "Just galls me, thinking of how the town is going to josh me if she's still sheriffing when our wedding day dawns in September."

Seating himself on the bunk, Hatfield enlisted the young freighter's assistance in getting his cowboots off his heat-swollen feet. Now that the prospect of getting some sleep and rest was at hand, the Ranger realized how exhausting the overnight ride from Marfa had been.

As Prescott was drawing the window shades and preparing to leave, Hatfield asked suddenly, "Del, I didn't have a chance to discuss the situation too fully with Mary. What can you tell me about this Raoul Lepperd hombre?"

Del Prescott's face was grave as he turned to face his guest.

"Lepperd's Freight Lines have been established a long time, Hatfield. Folks said I was foolish, opening my own line between Rio Vista and El Paso in competition with Lepperd. But if you're hinting that he is mixed up in smuggling, I'd say you were barking at the wrong coon. Leppard is as square as a section corner."

HATFIELD stretched out on the blankets after divesting himself of his double gun harness.

"I just wondered," he yawned. "Lepperd's wagons cross the Rio Grande boundary several times a week. It would be a nice set-up for a contraband runner —having a legitimate freight business as a blind to smuggling."

Prescott said, "My wagons work over the international line the same as Lepperd's, for that matter. And I'm here to tell you the Customs authorities, both Mexican and American, go over every one of our loads with a fine-tooth comb."

"Ten-dollar gold pieces," Hatfield pointed out drowsily, "are pretty small, could be mighty easy hid inside a bale of cotton, for instance, or a bale of cowhides."

Prescott laughed. "You ought to see how them Border officers search cotton bales and hide bales down at the Rio Vista Port of Entry, Hatfield. Lepperd or me couldn't smuggle a mustard seed past those boys. They know their business."

Hatfield closed his eyes. "Just the same," he reminded, "the Treasury Department knows that a million in bogus gold coins have leaked across the bounda-

ry in the past ten years. *Somebody's* transporting that money, by some means."

Del Prescott paused in the doorway, grinning at the Ranger.

"Whatever means the Gold Eagle bunch use, it ain't got anything to do with Raoul Lepperd's wagons. I know. I worked for Lepperd before I struck out in business with my own freight string."

Already on the ragged edge of sleep, Hatfield said, "Would you wake me up at sundown? I'll have to eat and get myself a haircut before train time. Can't show up in Austin looking like I do now, or they'd jail me and turn Musto loose."

Prescott nodded. "I'll wake you in plenty of time, Ranger. Pulling out with my wagons come cool of evening, myself. . . ."

The sun was low in the west when Prescott roused Hatfield from a deep slumber from which he emerged physically refreshed and ready for the overnight train journey to Austin.

After a visit to the Madero barber shop and bathhouse, Hatfield returned to Prescott's shack decked out in a change of shirt and levis from his saddlebags, which he also would be leaving in Prescott's keeping until his return from Austin the following week.

He found Sheriff Mary Miles waiting with Prescott at the freight yard, and accepted their invitation to have supper with them at the Big Bend Café, across the street from the jailhouse.

Hatfield hardly recognized Mary. She had changed from her mannish garb to a demur cotton dress of a pastel shade of blue, which heightened the golden sheen of her hair. Seeing her like this, it was plain to Hatfield why Del Prescott had irrevocably lost his heart to the sheriff of Catclaw County.

During the meal, no reference was made to Jeb Musto nor to the killing of Rocky Miles last winter. They laughed and talked about everything else, like old friends. Once Hatfield remarked, "You two seem to have reached an understanding. You aren't tearing each other's hair out like you were this morning when I first dropped into the sheriff's office."

Mary laughed, tinkling laughter that had pure music in it. "Del knows when he's licked," she declared. "And for a wonder he's satisfied with the precautions I've taken while I'm having time out. I've got a deputy riding herd on Musto and my other customers in the hoosegow. And things are quiet in Madero tonight. No honkytonk rows—so far."

Prescott said proudly, "Would you believe it, Hatfield, this gal totes her star right into a honkytonk and claps her handcuffs on drunks when they get disorderly. Marches 'em right over to the calaboose, just like she was seven feet tall."

"Del," Hatfield said sincerely, "I'd believe anything you'd tell me about the sheriff." He consulted his watch. "Half hour to train time," he said, abruptly becoming serious. "I think I'll mosey over and get acquainted with my prisoner now, Mary. Or I should say, your prisoner—for awhile yet."

IN TEN minutes a burly half-breed deputy was unlocking the bullpen door at Mary's order. Hatfield took the lantern from the deputy and motioned for Mary and Del Prescott to remain in the office while he went into the bullpen for his first glimpse of the outlaw he was preparing to take to Austin.

"Third cell on your left, Jim," Mary called to him. "I'll have the sack of counterfeit out of the safe and ready to turn over to you when you come out."

Closing the bullpen door behind him, Hatfield made his way down the narrow aisle between parallel rows of iron-barred cells and hung the lantern on a ceiling beam hook. Then he walked over to the third cell where Jeb Musto sat morosely on his cot, pecking at a tray of food.

Using the key which the *mestizo* jailer had provided him, Hatfield unlocked Musto's cell and entered. The prisoner glanced up without change of expression.

Jeb Musto had the gigantic width of shoulders and heavily muscled arms which were to be expected of a man in the blacksmithing trade. His shaven bullet-

shaped head merged with elephantine neck and shoulders, giving him the grotesque appearance of a professional wrestler in some traveling frontier carnival. He had not shaved since his arrest and his heavy jaw and jowls were furred with an inch-long growth of curling black beard.

Staring up at his visitor with beady, mud-colored eyes half hidden behind thick lids, Jeb Musto inquired sourly, "You're the Ranger who thinks he's going to take me to Austin?"

Hatfield consulted his watch again. "Train leaves in ten minutes," he said. "My name is Hatfield."

Musto shoved his tray aside, gulped down the last of his coffee and came to his feet, exposing tobacco-stained fangs in a confident grin.

He asked, "Jim Hatfield—the Lone Wolf?"

The Ranger nodded, reaching in a chaps pocket to draw out a pair of handcuffs. Before Musto was aware of what was happening, Hatfield had snapped the jawed manacles around Musto's right wrist, a wrist so heavy-boned that it extended the iron cuff to its last notch. The other fetter Hatfield locked about his own left wrist. Then he answered the blacksmith's question.

"The same, Musto."

Musto rubbed a knuckle along his bulbous, scarred nose.

"Flattering, getting the top Ranger to ride herd on me. A shame, too, in a way."

Hatfield motioned his prisoner toward the door of the cell.

"What do you mean, a shame?"

Musto laughed hoarsely. "Meaning that the Ranger don't live who can get me as far as Austin, Hatfield."

Hatfield shrugged off the prisoner's bravado. He realized that this man was dangerous; he outweighed Hatfield's hundred and eighty pounds by another hundred, and there was a steel-band strength coiled up in Musto's Gargantuan muscles which could break a man's spine as easily as Hatfield would snap a twig under heel. There would be no sleep for Hatfield during the night ahead.

Getting no answer to his implied threat of making a getaway en route to Austin, Musto followed Hatfield out into the bullpen hallway.

Then, a trace of nervousness in his voice now, Musto asked surlily, "That shemale sheriff think she can hang her old man's killing onto me?"

Hatfield's pulses raced. "Who said you were arrested on a murder charge, Musto?" he asked sharply. "Mary arrested you for being in possession of counterfeit specie."

Musto's cheeks lost color, and in that moment Jim Hatfield believed he had proof of Musto's homicidal guilt. Mary had made it clear that at no time had she hinted to Musto that her father had lived to damn the blacksmith as his killer, yet by his slip of the tongue just now, Musto had revealed guilty knowledge.

Hatfield opened the bullpen door and ushered his prisoner into the front office. Mary was standing beside her open safe, the bag of counterfeit gold eagles in her arms.

DEL PRESCOTT said to the Ranger, "Reckon my wagons are hitched and ready to shove off for Rio Vista, Hatfield. Good luck to you. Don't take any chances with this bucko."

After Prescott had shaken hands with Hatfield and taken his departure into the night, the Lone Wolf accepted the bag of bogus specie from the girl sheriff and said, "You aren't coming to the railway station with us, Mary. I'm not expecting any trouble getting Musto aboard that train for Austin, but if trouble breaks between now and then, I don't want to have you to worry about."

Mary nodded, her face a picture of deadly seriousness as she blew out the office lamp. If Jeb Musto had any friends in town, waiting for him to leave the jail, the next few minutes could be crucial ones.

"I haven't mentioned to anyone that I notified Austin to send a Ranger out here to pick up Musto," she whispered from

the darkness. "Since you don't wear your badge in the open, no one in Madero knows you're a Ranger. I don't think there'll be any trouble getting Musto onto that train—but be careful."

Hatfield accepted her warm handshake and then, hugging the money sack under his left elbow, he ushered the Gargantuan prisoner out into the street and turned west toward the Southern Pacific depot. He noted, with relief, that the street appeared deserted. Most of the saloons and honkytonks, with their brightly lighted windows, were on the opposite side of Main.

He heard Mary's whispered good-by from the jail doorway as he headed up the sidewalk, glad he was fettered to his prisoner with a link-joined iron bracelet.

Hatfield's senses were at a keen pitch, remembering the self-confidence Musto had shown in the jail a few minutes ago, remembering that Musto, if he were a member of the Gold Eagle smuggling ring, could count on plenty of outside help to get him free of the law.

They were crossing an alley between a mercantile store and the Wells Fargo stage stand when Jim Hatfield saw the bore-flash of a triggered sixgun stab from the black gut of that opening.

His senses did not register the crashing explosion of that gun. Something seemed to explode inside his skull and, on the dizzy verge of oblivion, he was vaguely aware of sprawling face-down in the alley's deep dust, the weight of his falling body pulled Jeb Musto to his knees alongside him. The sack of specie slid from under his arm.

Fighting to hold onto consciousness, Hatfield tried to reach his right hand to the holster at his flank, but his arm refused to obey the summons of his dazed brain. It was as if he were fully conscious, yet paralyzed in every muscle.

He knew a stabbing panic as he felt Jeb Musto's foul breath hot on his face. The blacksmith rolled him over on his back and began pawing in his chaps pockets in search of the handcuff key.

And then, from behind him, Hatfield heard Sheriff Mary Miles' sharp cry, and the sudden slamming of a sixgun from the direction of the jail. Vaguely he realized that Mary must have seen him go down, and that she was leveling a covering fire at the hidden gunman in the alley, who had shot him from ambush.

Sprawled helpless in the dirt, Hatfield heard Musto's confederate start shooting again, heard the measured cadence of gunfire as the gunman returned Mary's fire, his slugs whining over Musto's crouched shape to slam and crash against the adobe front of the jailhouse.

Subconsciously, Hatfield counted those shots. Five of them, fired in rapid succession by a gun-fanner. Counting the shot that had put Hatfield out of the fight, that was six.

Words he could not force his voice to say stormed through the Ranger's throbbing brain, His gun's empty, but don't come into the open, Mary! He's sure to have an extra forty-five!

Hatfield felt his handcuffed wrist jerk, then fall back limply. Musto had unlocked his own bracelet. And now the blacksmith was hauling the specie sack out from under the Ranger.

AS IF through a sheet of clouded glass, Hatfield saw the gunman scuttle from the alley over to Musto's side, heard a harsh whisper:

"Far end of the alley, Jeb! Horses waiting!"

And then a woman's voice spoke from the near shadows:

"Stand hitched, both of you! You're covered!"

Incredibly, Mary Miles had slipped out of the jail doorway, perhaps having counted the number of shots she had heard fired, and was banking on Hatfield's ambusher having an empty gun and having had no time to reload.

Turning his head with a supreme effort, the half-stunned Ranger saw Mary at the corner of the Wells Fargo building, starlight glinting on her leveled Colt.

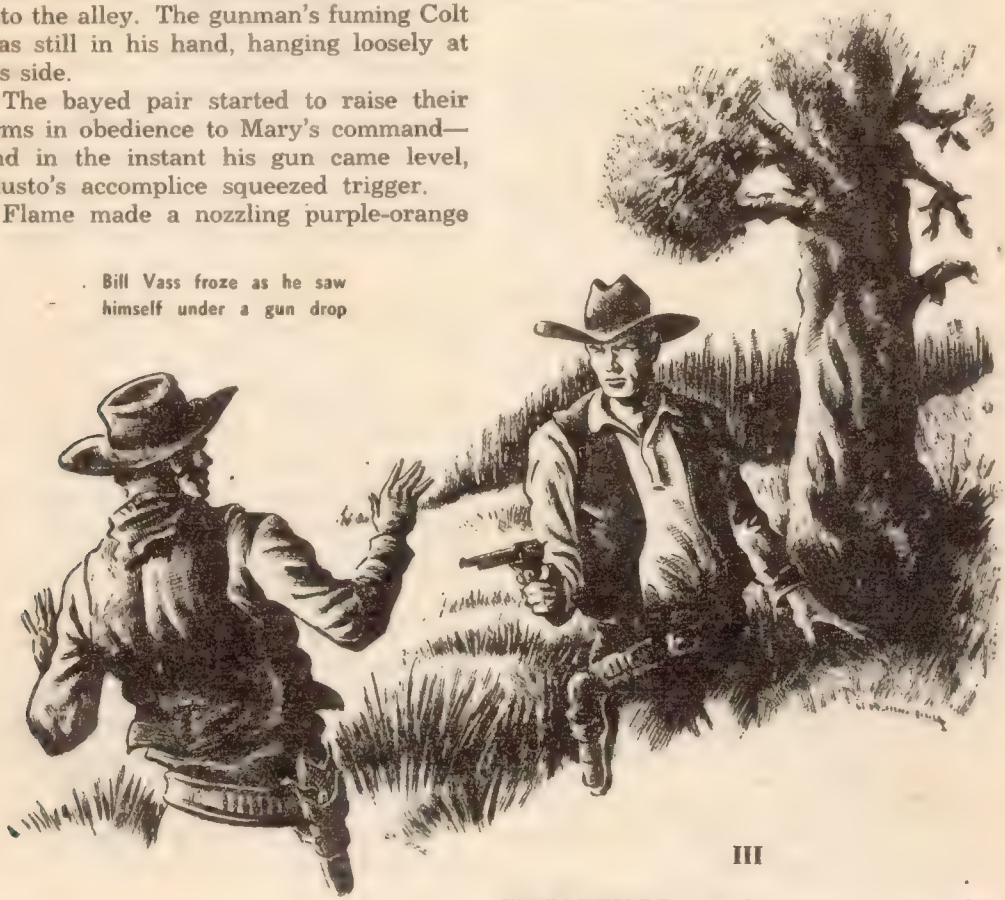
"Drop that gun, whoever you are!" she ordered. "I know it's empty, but you might

try using it for a club when I get close. If Hatfield's dead you'll both hang!"

Musto and the killer from the alley stood shoulder to shoulder, frozen in the moment they were just about to dive back into the alley. The gunman's fuming Colt was still in his hand, hanging loosely at his side.

The bayed pair started to raise their arms in obedience to Mary's command—and in the instant his gun came level, Musto's accomplice squeezed trigger.

Flame made a nozzling purple-orange



Bill Vass froze as he saw himself under a gun drop

flash from the bore of a gun which Jim Hatfield and the girl sheriff had been positive was empty. The concussion of that seventh shot snuffed out Hatfield's ebbing senses like a match in a gale.

The fallen Ranger was not aware of Mary Miles' choked scream, nor did he see her slump to her knees a few feet away. For bottomless oblivion had claimed Hatfield. It wiped out Jeb Musto's jeering yell, and the clomping of two pairs of boots slogging off up the alley's Stygian length.

But Hatfield's brain had carried one last coherent thought into oblivion with him. And it was a hunch so shocking that it had overridden his physical agony. For it had seemed to him that the man who had rescued Jeb Musto was Mary's own betrothed, Del Prescott!

III

HATFIELD was lying on a cot in the office of Madero's only medical practitioner, Dr. Paul Ashley, when his senses rallied as suddenly as they had left him.

He sat up, hands lifting to finger a collar of gauze around his neck. His eyes focused on Sheriff Mary Miles, sitting in a chair across the room while Dr. Ashley finished bandaging two fingers of her right hand.

"They—got away?"

Hatfield's huskily spoken words brought them wheeling around to face him, surprised that he had recovered his faculties.

"They got away, Jim," Mary said bit-

terly. "But that's not as important as is the fact that you aren't stretched out on an undertaker's slab this minute. That bullet creased the back of your neck—close enough to shock the spinal cord and knock you out."

Hatfield swung his legs off the cot and stood up, aware of a throbbing pain at the nape of his neck, and a dizzy feeling. He felt sure that would soon pass, though.

"You hit bad, Mary?" he asked, watching Dr. Ashley take a swab of cotton and dip it in alcohol to wipe bloodstains off the girl's forearm.

She shook her head. "Slug knocked the gun out of my hand. Trigger guard tore my fingers pretty bad. But I'll be all right in a few days."

Old Doc Ashley spoke then for the first time since Hatfield had come to. He said, "I'm glad young Prescott left before this shooting occurred, Mary. Why in tunket did you run such a risk, leaving cover to ride herd on this man, when you admitted yourself you thought he was dead when Musto got free of his handcuff?"

Mary's eyes were fixed on Hatfield as she said, "That's been puzzling me, Doc. I thought I had that bushwhacker's shots counted. When he came out of the alley with smoke pouring out of his gun, I thought it was the one he'd just emptied, swapping slugs with me. I—I thought I was perfectly safe in forcing a showdown."

Hatfield nodded slowly, puzzlement showing in his eyes.

"There *were* seven shots," he said quietly. "You didn't miscount, Mary. His first bullet grazed me. I wasn't so knocked out that I didn't pick up the count when he was trying to scare you back into the jail. He fired at you five times."

Mary walked over to lay a hand on Hatfield's arm. "Then I *was* right, thinking his gun was empty. And he didn't have time to reload. I know that."

Hatfield had started to speak when Dr. Ashley, busy dumping his surgical instruments into a sterilizing kettle on the stove, remarked grumpily, "So you both counted six shots. Simple to figure out. That gunslammer had another hogleg. That's where the seventh bullet came from."

Mary shook her head doggedly. "No. No, Doc. While I was crossing the stage depot porch, I had a good look at that hombre in the alley, when he was coming out to Musto, thinking he'd chased me out of the fight, I suppose. He had only one holster on his belt. I made certain of that before I called for showdown."

Hatfield was watching Mary intently. Her view of the gunman could not have been any better than the one he had had, and his had been at much closer range. The man had been a sharp-cut silhouette against the backlighting of a store further up Main Street. Had Mary noticed what Hatfield had observed—that Musto's confederate was the same build as Del Prescott? The only one in town, aside from Mary and Hatfield themselves, who knew Musto was to be taken out of jail that night, to board the train for Austin!

Hatfield heard Doc Ashley saying, "Then if it was the same gun made all the ruction, you didn't count the shots right, Mary. Who ever heard of a seven-shot revolver? There ain't no such animal. Even the old pepper-boxes were chambered for only six slugs."

Hatfield forced himself to ask Mary the question that had been burning in his brain at the moment he had skidded into unconsciousness over there in the alley mouth:

"Mary, you say you saw the hombre who was waiting to rescue Musto? Do you know who it was?"

He was watching her intently, knowing her fierce loyalty to the man she loved.

But Mary said instantly, "He was just a black shadow without a face so far as I could see, Jim. I'm sorry. I couldn't identify him if he was standing in this room this minute."

HATFIELD turned away, moving over to the window to look out on the night-blacked street. This doctor's office was on a side street, but he could see over on Main Street, and see the crowd congregated in front of the Wells Fargo alley where the shoot-out had occurred. He

wondered briefly who had carried him over here to Doc Ashley's.

Of one thing Hatfield was sure in his mind. Sheriff Mary Miles had no slightest suspicion that the man who had shot the gun from her hand might be Del Prescott. Assuming that it had been Prescott, the Ranger thought soberly, he wouldn't have shot at Mary to kill her. At such close range, knocking the gun out of her hand hadn't been an extraordinary feat of marksmanship. It was what Prescott would have done, to spare the life of the girl he wanted to marry.

But by no word or expression did Hatfield give Mary or the doctor a hint of this new and real worry in his mind.

"Well"—he sighed heavily—"it's fifteen to ten. The shooting took place forty-five minutes ago. But we can't hope to do any tracking in that alley now, not after the way that crowd is milling around, blotting sign."

Tears glistened in Mary's eyes as she said despairingly, "Losing Musto was a terrible blow to me, Jim, but I know it was no fault of yours in the least. It just means that Dad's killer is probably on his way to Mexico by now, and that I've lost my chance. I'll never see Jeb Musto again. He would never dare show his face around Madero after this."

Hatfield and Mary left the doctor's office a short while later, the Ranger escorting the girl sheriff to the modest frame cottage on a back street where she and her father had made their home. Reaching it, Hatfield realized that old Rocky Miles had dragged himself a good three blocks from Musto's corral, with a bullet in his brisket.

At the door, Mary Miles said, "You'll be returning to Marfa tomorrow, I suppose. I'll see you before you leave?"

The grimness of Hatfield's face could not be seen in the darkness as he said, "I won't be around here tomorrow, Mary, but that doesn't mean I'll be heading back to Marfa. The moment you released Jeb Musto to my custody that made him my responsibility. I won't quit now until I've dabbed my loop on that blacksmith—and the man who gunned me down tonight."

The admiration in Mary's eyes, seen by the gleam of a hanging lantern beside the door, was almost reverence.

"But you haven't a thing to go on," she protested. "Even if you pick up their trail leading out of town, it's sure to take you to the Rio Grande. It's plain enough Musto will head for Mexico. He'll want to get beyond the reach of Texas law as fast as he can."

"I think," Hatfield said enigmatically, as he turned away and went down the porch steps, "the seventh bullet that gunman fired tonight is what is going to put him behind the bars, Sheriff. That's a clue I aim to start working on, beginning tonight."

Before Mary could call out to ask what he meant, Hatfield had vanished in the darkness, headed toward the glimmer of honkytonk lights marking Main Street.

Avoiding the excited throng which spread from the Wells Fargo alley to the jailhouse, Hatfield made his way across back lots to Del Prescott's wagon yard where he had stabled Goldy.

He was thinking, If this should lead to Del Prescott, it'll break Mary's heart. I hope for her sake that Del wasn't the man who left me behind for dead tonight.

Slipping into Prescott's barn through a back door, so as not to attract the attention of the night hostler, Hatfield saddled his golden stallion and led the horse outside. Five minutes later, when he left Madero behind him, he was heading northwest, paralleling the course of the Rio Grande. He was on his way to El Paso—in search of a clue that could put him on the right track in a manhunt.

Dawn found Ranger Jim Hatfield twenty miles short of his destination. He picked up the wagon road which flanked the Southern Pacific Railroad, and by midmorning reached El Paso, the westernmost settlement of the vast Lone Star State.

Twice on that road Hatfield had passed wagons bearing Del Prescott's name. He knew that Raoul Lepperd did not compete with Prescott on this El Paso run, for wagons could not meet the low freight

rates of the railroad. Prescott's little freight outfit serviced outlying Texas points not reached by the Southern Pacific.

ENTERING El Paso, Hatfield was careful to avoid the district headquarters of the Texas Rangers, where he would be recognized. He had a secret destination in mind—the gun shop of old Levi Shapiro who, long ago transplanted from the Bowery in New York City, now was the most celebrated gunsmith in the entire West.

On his way toward Shapiro's place, near the Jaurez bridge, he passed a freight warehouse emblazoned with Del Prescott's name, and made a mental note of its location. A block short of Shapiro's little hole-in-the wall shop, he found a stable where Goldy could be taken care of, then ate a belated breakfast in a Mexican tortilla parlor.

It was five minutes short of noon when the Lone Wolf stood before Shapiro's door, under a huge wooden replica of a Colt six-shooter, ten feet in length. Shapiro himself came to meet the Ranger.

"Jeem Hatfield — my good friend! Come in!" The venerable Jewish craftsman greeted Hatfield warmly, for these two had been devoted friends for years. Invariably, when Hatfield visited El Paso he looked up old Levi. Since Hatfield himself was a man whose profession made guns the tool of his trade and the price of remaining alive, he had whiled away many an idle hour inspecting Shapiro's fabulous collection of pistols, muskets and buffalo rifles.

This morning, however, Hatfield's face was grave as he shook hands with the old gunsmith. He was here to track down a clue, so slim it might peter out into nothing—or it *might* put him on the right track to smash the Gold Eagle smuggling ring!

When the amenities were over and he had accepted the inevitable cup of coffee from the pot which bubbled day and night on Shapiro's little alcohol stove, Hatfield got down to brass tacks.

"Levi," he said, "you probably make more custom-built firearms than any man in America."

"That is so," Shapiro agreed modestly. "I am havink customers from all over the vorld, Jeem."

Hatfield said, "During your career, especially since you moved to El Paso from New York, did you ever fashion a cylinder for a revolver—a Colt or a Remington perhaps—which had seven chambers instead of the regulation six?"

Shapiro cuffed back his black skull cap and fingered his patriarchal beard thoughtfully. "That I have," he said. "In a regular sixgun cylinder, you start with a block of steel and turn it down to a cylinder on a metal lathe. Then you lay out a circle with a scriber and circumscribe the six points of a hexagon. Then you select a drill to give you the caliber you wish—a forty-five is five-hundredths short of being exactly a half-inch in diameter. You follow me, Jeem? Then you clamp your solid steel cylinder under a drill press and bore your chambers. It is precise work, you understand. Not one gunsmith in a t'ousand can do it right, so the chamber will line up with the gun-barrel you're fitting it for."

Levi Shapiro was a loquacious man, Hatfield knew he could—and would—ramble on for an hour concerning the engineering problems connected with manufacturing a firearm. He started to interrupt, but the old man hurried on:

"Now, you asking, can a six-shooter be a seven-shot gun? But of course, Jeem. You lay out a seven-sided polygon—a heptagon, you understand. But of course, an ordinary cylinder for a forty-five would not accommodate seven chambers. It would explode the first time it was fired. The cylinder walls would be too thin to absorb the—"

Hatfield lifted his hand to silence the old man.

"But it *is* possible to chamber a special-made cylinder for a stock model revolver so that it will take seven cartridges?" he asked. "You've done such a job since you came to Texas?"

SHAPIRO'S head bobbed up and down. "That I haff, Jeem. You wish such a gun made for you? I do not recommend it. In your work, a Texas Ranger has to know that his first shot will count. No bullet less than a forty-four, say, could knock a man down for sure. I grant you there are times when one extra load in your Colt might mean the difference between life and death, but —"

"Levi, old sock," Hatfield broke in patiently, "I don't want a seven-shot smokepole. I don't know anybody who does. What I came here to find out was who commissioned you to turn out a seven-load gun. I want to know when such a gun was purchased. It's official Ranger business, Levi."

Shapiro's eyes took on a far-away look. "It was three years ago come Yom Kippur," he said musingly. "I remember it vell, for never in my fifty years as a gunsmith have I received such an order. I remember this customer wanted nine chambers, for convenience in target practice to cut down reloading so often, he told me. But that was impossible, so he settled for seven . . . Vait, I look it up for you."

For what seemed an interminable while, Levi Shapiro poured over dog-eared ledgers in which he had listed the details of special work he had done through the years. Each moment added to the intolerable pressure of suspense building up in Hatfield. What if the name of Shapiro's customer turned out to be Del Prescott?

Finally Shapiro looked up, removed his thick-lensed glasses from his beaked nose, and said, "I find it for you where I have made it, Jeem. I converted a standard Colt forty-five into a seven-shot thirty-eight. The customer's name—I cannot find in this ledger. I do not know how it could happen, but half that page, below my description, it has been accidentally torn away. I —"

Jim Hatfield groaned. There his hopes went glimmering. He shook his head. But he supposed he should be satisfied with the fact that a seven-shot revolver could be made, that Shapiro had once made one, and not too long ago, so it would be in active use now. And, looking at those raggedy ledgers, much thumbed and used, it was a wonder there was still anything readable in them at all.

Old Shapiro was looking at him anxiously. "But the gun, Jeem," he said. "Does that mean anything to you that I have once made one for seven shots?"

Hatfield grinned. "It means a tremendous lot, Levi. Just how much it means I don't know yet. But it puts an entirely new light on a case I'm handling right now." He looked up with a new interest, at a quick thought. "Say — you don't happen to know what that customer looked like, do you?"

The gunsmith slowly shook his head.

"Big man — tall, short, fat, lean — red hair, black?" Hatfield prodded.

Shapiro sighed. "I am sorry, Jeem. He might be big and tall, he might be short, bowlegged. I do not know. To me, since first when I come here, all men look alike — cowboys."

"Well, thanks a lot anyway, old-timer. I'll let you know how I make out."

Leaving Shapiro's, Hatfield hurried to the livery barn where he had left Goldy. The gun which had blasted him down in a Madero alley last night had been a seven-shot job, but who owned it was as deep and dark a secret as ever. It could now belong to a bloodthirsty gunslinger, but it could just as well be the property of a freight line owner who enjoyed a spotless reputation.

Hatfield had no way of knowing who had been at the trigger of that seven-shot revolver the other night. But it was a clue, a definite lead in a baffling case, one which justified a visit to the headquarters in Rio Vista of the man who had been Musto's boss. And probably there he would find a lot of men who had been Musto's friends — if they would admit it now. Any one of them could own a seven-shot gun. Once he did find the owner of that gun, it would be all over but the handcuffs.

The Lone Wolf left El Paso as un-

obstrusively as he had entered it only an hour before, picking up the wagon road which led southwestward along the north bank of the Rio Grande. That road would not lead him to Rio Vista, for it veered inland a few miles further on, linking El Paso with Madero. But the Ranger recalled that a little-used trail followed the Rio Grande all the way to Rio Vista. And in that Port of Entry settlement, there was a chance he might cross trails with the fugitive Jeb Musto again.

Musto was obviously finished as a contraband runner in Texas. The blacksmith was too conspicuous, physically, to risk hiding out north of the Border or ever engaging in his trade anywhere in Texas again.

But Musto's usefulness to the Gold Eagle smuggling ring might continue on Mexican soil, beyond the reach of Yankee law. And if he could run the owner of that seven-shot Colt to earth it might eventually link some others in the big freight outfit with contraband-running as well.

IV

RIO VISTA, Texas, and its counterpart of the same name on the Chihuahua bank of the Rio Grande proved to be a squalid settlement of a thousand or so population, a rat's nest of adobes and tarpaper-roofed saloons. Only its status as a Port of Entry justified its existence.

Riding in from the northwest the day following his departure from El Paso, Jim Hatfield saw that the Rio Grande was reduced to its dry-season trickle. There was no necessity for anyone wanting to cross the river to take the trestled bridge.

Conspicuous on the Texas side was a corrugated iron warehouse with a huge sign on its roof that was visible for miles. It read:

LEPPERD FREIGHT—
HERMOSILLO TO ALBUQUERQUE

Ten minutes after his arrival in the river town, Jim Hatfield was reining Goldy to a halt in front of Raoul Lepperd's warehouse office. A half-block down the street he saw the U. S. Customs buildings, guarding the north end of the international bridge.

Never having visited this town before, the Ranger felt reasonable safe against recognition. Even if he met Raoul Lepperd face to face—and even if Lepperd was the man who had rescued Jeb Musto — Hatfield knew the odds were against mutual recognition. That alley mouth in Madero had been too dark for Hatfield to get a good look at the gunman; that had worked both ways.

Sauntering over to the awninged porch in front of the Lepperd freight office, Hatfield spotted a notice tacked to the bulletin board:

URGENTLY WANTED — BLACKSMITH
Excellent Wages, Well-Equipped Shop.
Qualified Men Apply in Main Office.

Hatfield's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. So Lepperd was trying to get a man for the job up in Madero left vacant by Jeb Musto.

The Lone Wolf had more than once hired out to various ranches, to stagecoach companies and other enterprises under investigation. This blacksmithing job might be the break he was hunting for. As one of Raoul Lepperd's employees, he would have a chance to study the freight line's activities — and its personnel — at close range.

Even if Lepperd had already filled the job, applying for it would not be in vain. It would give Hatfield a legitimate pretext for meeting Raoul Lepperd face to face. Schooled to read character, Hatfield put a great deal of faith in his ability to size up a man on first meeting. And he wanted a good look at the man who'd had a contraband runner in his employ.

Flipping his unfired quirly into the gutter, Hatfield made his way into the freight company's office. It was a busy place, with muleskinners standing by with manifest papers, waiting to receive their shipping orders.

An harassed clerk spotted Hatfield

and motioned him over to the counter.

The Ranger jerked a thumb toward the doorway and said, "Understand you're looking for a blacksmith."

The clerk nodded. "Blacksmiths are hard to find these days. You've had experience?"

Hatfield grinned. "Anything from shoeing horses to retiring a wagon is my meat, sir."

The clerk said doubtfully, "You seem husky, but hardly as muscular as most blacksmiths. Mr. Lepperd isn't looking for a grubline rider who will work a few days, then ride on. You look like a cow puncher or bronc buster to me."

Hatfield shrugged. "Give me a maul or a farrier's rasp and I can deliver the goods. Where's the boss man?"

The clerk lifted a hinged leaf in the counter and motioned for Hatfield to follow him to a door marked "PRIVATE" in the back wall of the office. The clerk rapped timidly.

A deep voice barked "What is it?"

The clerk poked his head into the inner office and said meekly, "Applicant for that blacksmithing job up at Madero, sir. Want me to send him in?"

The answer was apparently in the affirmative, for the clerk stood aside and motioned Hatfield to enter.

"Mr. Lepperd can give you five minutes," he said surlily.

ENTERING the freighter's private office, Hatfield was amazed at the luxury of its furnishings—a deep-piled carpet, desk and filing cabinets in gleaming mahogany, costly oil paintings depicting Western scenes on the walls.

Lepperd was at his desk, doing some bookkeeping of some sort. Turning to face his visitor, Raoul Lepperd revealed the weather-browned face of a man who had not always been a desk worker. He had the rugged physique of a man who had worked his way to the top from a beginning as mulewhacker.

The thought ran through Hatfield's mind, He's the same general build as Del Prescott — and the man who gunned me

A TALL TEXAS TALE

Hot Stuff

A TEXAN touring Europe with an Englishman was not impressed with the wonders revealed to him.

When the Parthenon at Athens was pointed out, he just remarked, "Yes it's nice, but we got a post office in Fort Worth just as beautiful."

Of the colosseum at Rome, he said with a shrug: "You should see some of the football stadiums we've got deep in the heart of."

He was passive at the Dome of the Pantheon, saying, "The knob on our capitol at Austin has got this here panther whatsis backed off the map."

Looking out over the Bay of Naples, he said, "If you could only see the Gulf on a clear sunny day!"

The Englishman was disgusted. Finally they reached Vesuvius. As they viewed the awe-inspiring smouldering mass, the Englishman asked with cutting sarcasm, "Have you anything like that in Texas?"

For a moment the Texan was stumped. Then he said, "No-o, but we've got a fire department at Houston that could put the thing out in ten minutes."

—W. L. Hudson

down in Madero. Still, there's probably a good many others working here who have the same build.

A bulge under Lepperd's expensive tailored coat indicated that he packed a gun. But of course it was impossible to tell whether or not that sidearm carried a special-built seven-shot cylinder.

"Morning," Hatfield said. "Understand you're looking for a good blacksmith."

Lepperd lifted a Cuban cigar from his teeth, appraising Hatfield with eyes as cold and lusterless as the leaden tips of bullets peeping from a gun cylinder.

"I am — if he can come up to my standards. Who are you?"

Hatfield said, "The man you're looking for, sir. Name's Bob James. I was born with a pair of forge tongs in one hand and cut my milk teeth on the horn of an anvil."

Lepperd said around his cigar, "I need a blacksmith up in Madero to keep my wagons in repair. It's important for me to own shops every fifty miles all the way to Albuquerque. You got any references?"

Hatfield hesitated. "No-o, sir — no references. My blacksmithing has been done on cow spreads in North Texas mostly. But if you hire me, my work will speak for itself."

After a pause, Lepperd seemed to come to a decision. He said, "I need a smith pronto — can't afford breakdowns on the road. I'll have to accept what you say about what you can do. But I've got one question to ask, James — one I ask every man I hire. I want a straight-out answer, too, for I can find out the truth in time, anyway."

"What's the question?"

"In my business," Lepperd said earnestly, "I have dealings with this country and with Mexico, too. I have to be almighty careful I don't put a wanted man on my pay-roll. My company can't afford to get mixed up in anything that smells of Border-hopping. If it did, I'd lose my exporting license in a plumb hurry."

Hatfield grinned. "I'm not dodging any sheriffs."

Lepperd nodded approvingly. *"Bueno,* then. You're hired — at a hundred a month. How long you work for me is up to you. I won't stand for any drunkenness or laying down on the job. You understand the deal, James?"

Hatfield nodded. "Sure do, Boss, and thanks."

LEPPERD fingered his clean-shaven jaw thoughtfully. "Now — listen. You know this town of Madero where you'll be working?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I rode through on my way south," he evaded. "Never saw the place before. — Say, you furnish shop and tools?"

"The best," Lepperd said. "I'll tell you what, James. I've got a ten-wagon string pulling out for Socorro tonight. I'm short a driver. If you can handle a team as far north as Madero — that's a two-night haul, with a day stop at Cavalry Springs — that will take care of getting you to Madero and earn you an extra ten dollars as well. You on?"

"Fine. Where do I find your wagons?"

Lepperd turned to his desk, scribbled something on a card. and handed it, with a heavy iron key, to Hatfield.

"My wagons are undergoing Border inspection on the Chihuahua side right now," he said. "They pull out at ten tonight. This card is your pass to show the U. S. Customs boys. The key will open the blacksmith shop up in Madero. Report to my wagon boss — name's Bill Vass. Tell him you're to drive the Number Eight wagon as far as Madero."

Lepperd turned back to his desk with finality.

Leaving the warehouse office, Hatfield had not come to any definite conclusion about what kind of man this Raoul Lepperd actually was. The fellow required a little more intensive study. Well, Jim Hatfield could accommodate. And not be prejudiced because the freight line owner would cast a silhouette on a dark night like that of a certain killer who had tried to nail Ranger hide to a corral fence.

Wagons pull out at ten tonight, Hatfield mused. They're on the Mexican side of

the river now. That ought to give me time to snoop around and see if Jeb Musto is hanging out in the neighborhood.

He ordered a meal at a Chinese restaurant near the riverfront, then rode Goldy over to the boundary gates. The new shift of Border Patrol and U. S. Customs men were just reporting for duty.

The signed pass Lepperd had given him, identifying him as one Robert James, employed by the Lepperd Freighting Company, was accepted by the U. S. border officials, and the Ranger rode his sorrel across the Rio Grande bridge onto Mexican soil.

He located Lepperd's freight wagons at once by the distinctive Red L insignia on the end gate of each big Studebaker. There were ten wagons in the string which would be crossing the Border tonight, north-bound for New Mexico.

At the moment, each wagon was empty. The cargo was being searched thoroughly by teams of Mexican and American border inspectors, alert to ferret out illegal items. On the far side of the block-square open compound where wagons were halted for inspection, Hatfield caught sight of three yellow-painted Pittsburg freighters bearing in bold letters the sign:

PRESCOTT FREIGHT LINE.

ALTHOUGH Hatfield was half a block away, he recognized Del Prescott on the seat of the lead wagon, awaiting his turn at the Port Of Entry. The Ranger thought, I've got to keep my distance from that fellow as long as daylight holds or he'd tip my hand for sure.

He found Lepperd's wagon boss, Bill Vass, at the tail end of the Lepperd string. The freighting ramrod was standing by while customs inspectors systematically opened bales of Mexican cowhides which were being shipped to a tannery in Socorro.

After showing his pass and informing Vass that he was to drive Wagon Number Eight as far as Madero, Hatfield watched Vass' men busily roping together bales of hides passed by the inspectors.

"What are the star-toters hunting for—ticks?" the Ranger asked.

"Contraband," Vass grunted. "Narcotics, 'dobe dollars, anything we might be trying to smuggle duty-free into Texas. Might as well get busy, James. You and your swamper will have to reload Number Eight."

Gone, Hatfield realized, was his chance to spend the rest of the afternoon roaming through the Mexican town, hoping to pick up some clues as to Jeb Musto's whereabouts. Loading six tons of assorted freight aboard Wagon Number Eight would take the rest of the day and perhaps several hours into the night.

"All right, Boss," Hatfield said. "I'm supposed to be a blacksmith. Didn't know I'd start out hustling freight."

Vass eyed his new wagoneer with fresh interest. "You taking over at the Madero Shop, James?"

Hatfield nodded. "Taking Jeb Musto's place," he said. "Lucky for me Musto quit. Blacksmithing jobs are pretty scarce."

Vass grinned. "Musto didn't exactly quit," the foreman commented. "The law picked him up for smuggling counterfeit gold. If Musto is smart, he'll surrender to the law, too."

"Meaning what?"

"Whatever the U. S. would hand Musto for smuggling ain't anything compared to what Lepperd would do to him for putting a blot on the company's record. This is the first time any Lepperd man has ever been caught running contraband. Lepperd's pretty finicky about keeping the company's record clean. . . . "

As Hatfield had anticipated, getting his wagon loaded, under the constant surveillance of Border guards, consumed the rest of the daylight hours. He was exhausted when Number Eight was reloaded and the Mexican and American officials had tacked the "Passed" placard on the tail-gate.

"We eat supper at the Chihuahua Café yonder," Bill Vass explained to Hatfield, "and the wagons pull out as soon as the boys get Number Nine and Number Ten

loaded. Train sticks together, you savvy. We figure to hit Cavalry Springs for our night camp by daylight, camp during the heat of the day tomorrow, and drive all night to Madero."

Joining the other Lepperd employees at the Chihuahua Café on the west side of the inspection compound, Hatfield had to duck out of line as he was entering the eating house. He had seen young Del Prescott coming out the door with his wagon crew.

He heard Prescott say to Bill Vass, "See you at the Springs, Bill. I'm pulling out right away. Sorry your boys will have to eat my dust."

Vass replied testily, "Just make sure that shoestring outfit of yours don't block the road for a real freight string, Del. When you going broke and hiring back with us?"

Hatfield felt better, knowing Prescott would be ahead of him on the Madero road tonight.

Driving a freight wagon north was a boring task, so far as Hatfield's original plans were concerned. His sole purpose in hiring out to Lepperd had been to get a close-hand look at the way the freight line operated, and he had already seen to his satisfaction that smuggling activities were out of the question at this end of the freight run.

The thorough inspection practices of the Mexican and United States governments proved that.

V

DURING supper, Hatfield's casual inquiries produced the information that the wagons would not move across the Rio Grande for another two hours, by which time the last two wagons in Lepperd's string would have been reloaded. Paying for his meal and slipping out of the crowded restaurant, Hatfield figured he could profitably spend at least one hour in checking up on Lepperd's big warehouse and loading docks here in Mexican Rio Vista.

The work of sorting, storing and handling the mountains of merchandise which the big freighter exported went on around the clock. In the army of peons engaged in that work, Hatfield believed he could locate somebody who would know Jeb Musto personally, and could tip him off if the blacksmith had been seen in this vicinity within the past twenty-four hours.

There was an outside chance, admittedly slim, that the fugitive might even go to work for Lepperd here in the Chihuahua yards. But that was out, for it would be assuming that Raoul Lepperd was engaged in illegal traffic himself, and that the Ranger had no reason even to suspect.

Hatfield had left Goldy hitched to the bull-bar of Wagon Eight. The wagons had been run out of the lanternlighted inspection zone and were parked under a row of palmettos on one side of a street which led to the international bridge.

Heading toward them, Hatfield saw Del Prescott's three wagons crossing over to Texas soil. The line of Lepperd's tandem-hitched Studebakers was deserted, each team hitched to the wagon in front until the drivers returned from supper.

Goldy whickered a greeting to Hatfield as the Ranger reached his wagon. Here, under the palmettos, it was too dark to see the stallion until Hatfield was alongside Goldy.

He was fumbling with the knot on the bridle reins when a guttural voice spoke from the blackness:

"Get your hands up, Ranger. I've got you covered with the same gun I used to knock off Rocky Miles last spring."

There was no mistaking that rasping voice. It was the voice of the outlaw Hatfield was hunting, Jeb Musto!

To attempt a draw in this dim light would be suicidal. Hatfield realized that instantly, but even with the flashing thought his chance was gone. For on the heels of his snarled order, Musto had jammed a sixgun barrel into Hatfield's belly.

"Wondered when you'd be around to pick up your bronc, Hatfield," came Mus-

to's rasping whisper. He reached out with his left hand to lift one of the Ranger's Colts from holster. "Wouldn't have known you were snooping around Rio Vista if I hadn't spotted the gold horse I seen you ride into Madero the other day."

Musto tossed Hatfield's gun into the air. The Ranger heard it land with a muffled thud atop the baled cowhides on the wagon alongside.

He said in a dull monotone, "You say you shot Rocky Miles?" Maybe if he could keep Musto talking, get him off-guard, he might see a way to get out of this mess.

The gorrilla-sized outlaw tossed Hatfield's second revolver onto the wagon alongside.

"Yeah," he said, "you heard me right the first time. That damned old sheriff spotted me stashing a sack of dinero under the snubbing post up at Madero one night. He made the mistake of taking my belt gun and not searching me for the hogleg I carried in an armpit rig." Musto laughed triumphantly. "He was reaching into the post hole after that sack of dinero when I plugged him point-blank."

Stalling desperately for time, Hatfield said, "You made a little mistake yourself, Musto. You shouldn't have left the old man lying beside that snubbing post."

Musto grunted, "I wasn't that foolish. I thought I'd better get rid of that bogus money first and then come back and drag Miles' carcass away from the corral. When I got back I found somebody had beat me to it, had already moved old Miles' carcass. Whoever it was lugged the old man over to Mary's house sure saved me the trouble of getting shed of him."

"Try to stay away from level roads. Climbing mountains is your best bet!"

HATFIELD knew, now, why Musto had felt safe in remaining in Madero after murdering Rocky Miles. The blacksmith had not realized that his victim had lived long enough to reach his daughter's arms, had never known the sheriff had been able to speak the fatal words which had led to Musto's eventual capture.

"We're getting out of here," Musto

whispered harshly, moving around behind Hatfield. "Start walking. We're taking a little pasear downriver to the tule marshes. You're one Texas Ranger who's going to rot on Mexican soil, Hatfield. Just to wrap up this business, maybe I'll mail your tin star back to Austin and let Roaring Bill McDowell wonder whatever became of the Ranger he's so damn proud of."

Sweat beaded the pores of Hatfield's cheeks as he started walking up the dark lane between the wagons and the palmettos. He realized now that Jeb Musto must have been hiding in the vicinity of the Port of Entry yards during the afternoon, and that that was when he'd had a chance to recognize Goldy. With the coming of darkness, Musto had hidden himself near the wagons, waiting for his opportunity to force a showdown with the Ranger who had pushed his manhunt south of the Border.

Now Musto was taking him to the marshlands flanking the Rio Grande below the settlements. It was doubtful if the blacksmith intended to kill him before they were safely out of town. Too many *rurale* police and Border guards were close by to risk a shooting in cold blood and then running for it.

Hatfield was alongside the lead wagon now. The river bank lay immediately ahead. Hatfield could see the high barbed wire fence flanking the water's edge, erected by the Mexican government to keep wetbacks from wading across the shallow river at this season of the year.

Once down in those shadow-filled bottoms, Hatfield knew he was doomed. To attempt to break away would bring a point-blank shot. Even in the Stygian blackness down there beside the fence, Musto couldn't miss. If Hatfield ever was going to do anything, it was now or never!

Without warning, he suddenly fell headlong to the ground with a choked cry. He heard Musto suck in a hard breath and hunker down, brushing Hatfield's legs with his gun-barrel.

"No tricks, Ranger," the blacksmith growled. "Get up from there and keep walking."

Hatfield struggled to a sitting position, faking a moan between locked teeth.

"Stumbled on something," he panted. "I — I've twisted my ankle, Musto. I can't use it — can't get up."

Musto grated out an oath. Squinting under the Number One wagon of the freight string, the blacksmith could see a Mexican *rurale* policeman pacing his patrol route not fifty feet away, at the foot of the international bridge ramp.

"Keep quiet," Musto said in a snarling whisper. "One holler out of you, Hatfield, and you're gut-shot. Try to stand up."

The Lone Wolf reached for the protruding hub of the wagon wheel above his shoulder and grunted painfully as he pulled himself to his feet, favoring his left leg. He made a show of testing his weight on an injured ankle and whispered shakily:

"No use. You might as well plug me now and get it over with, Musto. I'm damned if I try to hobble on a game leg when I know you're going to cash in my chips anyhow."

Musto moved in closer, shifting his six-gun from his right hand to his left and circling Hatfield with his heavy-muscled right arm.

"I shoot now," he panted against Hatfield's ear, "and it'll be in the guts. You'll suffer hellfire for hours before you kick off. Play your cards right and you'll get it quick and painless in the noggin."

Hatfield lurched away from the wagon wheel, letting Musto's encircling arm take his dead weight. Musto was moving toward the steep cutbank, making for the path alongside the barbed wire fence down in the Rio Grande bottoms, when Hatfield judged the time was ripe to make his play.

Hobbling painfully, as if he did not have the use of his left leg, he suddenly threw himself forward and brought his left leg up between Musto's knees. Thrown off balance, Musto was falling when both of Hatfield's hands shot out to seize the blacksmith's heavy-boned gun arm.

TWISTING his body violently as they struck the ground, knowing he would be helpless under Musto's giant strength if he did not make the next breath of time count, Hatfield rolled over on top of Musto and drove the blacksmith's gun against the dirt.

He felt the recoil of the Colt in Musto's hand as the outlaw involuntarily jerked trigger. Rolling over, Hatfield wedged his right elbow against the side of Musto's head. At the same instant he loosened his left hand on the blacksmith's arm and reached for the exposed butt of Musto's second sixgun which was projecting from his belt holster.

It had taken instantaneous timing, but the maneuver paid. With the advantage of surprise on his side, Hatfield had not given the beefy killer a chance to use his superior strength. Now he had Musto's reserve sixgun out of leather, and his legs straddling the blacksmith's prone body.

"Drop the other gun and lie still, Musto!"

The double click of a cocking gun inches from his ear told Musto that Hatfield had accomplished the impossible. The Ranger's trick, exploding with all the surprise of a bursting bomb, had grounded Musto and left him wide open for a slug in the skull.

Musto went momentarily berserk. Rearing to his feet, the sheer animal strength of him hurled Hatfield to one side. It was kill or be killed now, with Musto choosing to take the gamble of getting away the first shot.

Landing on his side, Hatfield brought up his gun to cover Musto's whirling bulk. He squeezed the trigger, and the brief flash from the gun muzzle gave him a pinched-off glimpse of his bullet ripping through Musto's head, to graze a wagon spoke and thud into the big Conestoga alongside.

For an instant Musto's wheeling gun was in line with Hatfield. An involuntary jerk of a trigger finger would mean that the blacksmith, already dead on his feet, could take his killer along with him into eternity!

Then Musto's knees gave way and he fell heavily against the wagon wheel, his bullet-ruined head leaving a scarlet smear down the spokes. Smoke still ribboned from the bore of the sixgun in the man's Gargantuan fist.

"Que es? Que es?"

Voices speaking Spanish were making a clamor now, as Border guards, hearing the brief crash of gunfire from the vicinity of Lepperd's wagons, began racing in Hatfield's direction.

The Ranger came shakily to his feet. He fully realized how close his brush with death had been. Five seconds ago Musto's big arm had been hugging his chest; now Musto lay dead at his feet, and Mexican Border officials were racing to investigate.

Indecision held Hatfield motionless for a moment. Then he knew he was not ready to identify himself as an American lawman to these *rurales*, as a Texas Ranger who had shot a man on soil outside his technical jurisdiction.

Knowing how Chihuahua justice worked, Hatfield knew he could not risk being detained below the Border for weeks while the Mexican authorities wrangled over the incident.

The wagon teams were snorting nervously in the harness, panicked by the crash of gunfire, the smell of blood, the reek of powder smoke. A big Mexican was running down from the bridge ramp with a lantern. Within moments Musto's corpse would be discovered.

Stooping quickly, Hatfield pried the smoking Colt out of Musto's dead hand. Then he turned and sprinted away in the darkness toward the end of the line of wagons.

Passing Goldy, the Ranger slowed to a walk and headed across the open compound, carefully avoiding the glare of lights. Anyone seen walking away from the scene of a fatal shooting would be subject to immediate arrest and questioning. And the last thing Hatfield wanted was for a Texas Ranger to be discovered with a Lepperd Freight Company workman's pass in his possession!

NOW the night was filled with a clamor of voices from the direction of the wagon train. That meant the Mexicans had discovered the dead man lying alongside the lead Studebaker.

Nearing the Chihuahua Café, Hatfield stepped into the shadows to avoid being seen by Bill Vass and his fellow wagoneers, who now were trooping out of the restaurant. The Ranger heard the wagon boss' voice lifted above the clamor:

"What was that shooting? What's all the crowd doing around my wagon yonder?"

The crew began racing across the compound to investigate the commotion. Hatfield climbed the steps of the cafe's arcaded gallery and calmly seated himself on a bench, unnoticed in the excitement.

Now that he had a chance to collect his thoughts, his first move was to inspect the sixgun he had taken from Musto's dead hand, and the one he had taken from the blacksmith's holster, the gun that had killed the big man. The Ranger jacked one gun open and twirled the cylinder, holding the weapon out in the light from the restaurant window to count the chambers.

It was a six-shot Peacemaker model Colt. The weapon which Musto claimed to have used to murder Rocky Miles was not the seven-shot .38 which the El Paso gunsmith, Levi Shapiro, had built on order. That customer was still unknown. This was not the gun with which Musto's accomplice had shot Jim Hatfield up in Madero.

The story was the same with Musto's other gun. Neither was seven-shot.

Walking over to the edge of the café porch, Hatfield dropped the dead man's revolvers into the rose bushes bordering the building.

He was heading across the compound a few minutes later to join the clamoring throng around Bill Vass' wagon when he thought, Too bad I didn't ask Musto the name of his smuggler boss. He was just enough of a braggart to have told me that, thinking he had me on the road to hell anyway.

By the same token, Musto might have named Del Prescott as one of his Gold Eagle confreres. As it was, the blacksmith had taken those all-important secrets into eternity with him.

Reaching the confused scene at the head of the line of wagons, Hatfield was in time to see two Mexicans in *rurale* police uniforms load Jeb Musto's corpse onto a stretcher and carry him away.

Pompous Border officials were examining the blood-stained wagon wheel by lanternlight, pointing out the splintered furrow in one of the hickory spokes, close to the junction with the iron-tired felly, where Hatfield's bullet had glanced after piercing Musto's head.

Other officials, both American and Mexican, were bellowing questions at the man in charge of these wagons — the ramrod, Bill Vass.

Elbowing closer, Hatfield heard Vass' repeated denials of any knowledge of the circumstances of Musto's death.

"Sure I knew the dead man," Vass admitted. "Jeb Musto. Used to be our blacksmith up at the Madero yards."

A man with a Border Patrol captain's rank asked quickly, "Musto? The man who was arrested for counterfeit smuggling up at the county seat two weeks ago? We got word yesterday that Musto had made a getaway from a Texas Ranger.

Vass nodded. "The same man. Must of lit out for the Border, Captain Jessup. What's all the fuss about? Musto's better off dead. It'll be good news to Raoul Lepperd, I can tell you that."

VI

JIM HATFIELD made his way back to Wagon Eight, climbed aboard and recovered his own sixguns from the cargo pile where Musto had tossed them. Now he had to decide his own course of action for the immediate future.

In a broad sense, Musto's death ended his mission here in Rio Vista. The murder of Mary Miles' father had been avenged. He could now telegraph Austin

that he had killed the escaped smuggler in line of duty, and send Captain McDowell the details later on by mail.

But Hatfield knew well enough that his connection with the case, as a Ranger, was only beginning. Whoever was the head of the Gold Eagle smuggling ring was still at large — the man who had issued Musto his orders — as well as all the others who composed the ring. Musto was the only one who had been caught in all the ten years the law on both sides of the Border had been after the counterfeit money smugglers.

Musto, of course, had been no more than a minor link in the chain. Still to be tracked down were not only the smugglers who got the ten-dollar gold pieces into American territory, but also the counterfeiters on the Mexican side of the Border who manufactured the bogus American coins. Still unsolved also was the major mystery of how that money had been shipped as far north as Madero, and turned over to Jeb Musto for safe keeping. And as yet, the U. S. Treasury Department had no line on who was "fencing" the spurious coins throughout America.

For the time being then, Hatfield believed he should sit tight and continue in Lepperd's employ. The smuggling bunch might have other agents in Madero besides Jeb Musto. By remaining with the freighting company he would be in an ideal position to keep his eyes and ears open for a possible break that so far had not been given Captain McDowell or anybody else.

He heard Bill Vass shouting for the drivers to assemble at the head of the line. Joining them, Hatfield heard the wagon boss barking orders:

"We've got clearance to pull out on schedule, men. This shooting don't concern us in any way. Be ready to roll in five minutes. We've got to make Cavalry Springs in time to break trail before the daytime heat hits us. Hustle along, buckos!"

At ten o'clock sharp Bill Vass, driving the lead wagon, led the wagon train over the international bridge onto Texas soil. Jim Hatfield, on the driver's seat of the third wagon from the end of the line, caught sight of Raoul Lepperd conferring with U. S. Customs officials in the guardhouse just outside the American Border gates. The freight line owner was being appraised of the mysterious death of his former blacksmith.

Inspection on the Texas side of the river was a routine formality of making sure the seals or the ropes which lashed down the wagon sheets had not been tampered with. In minutes, the wagons were rumbling northward under the Texas stars with the lights of Rio Vista falling behind in the dust clouds.

At this season of the year, wagon traffic invariably moved by night to avoid the punishing daytime heat. Short of three o'clock, the Lone Wolf Ranger spotted twinkling campfires on the prairie ahead and knew the wagons were approaching Cavalry Springs. This was a little-known historical site which was now a way-station for every freight outfit operating in the Big Bend country.

Over three hundred years before, the springs had been a camp ground for Spanish *conquistadores* exploring a new world. As the years had passed, there had come overland emigrants, bound for the gold fields of California by the southern route, who had rested their oxen here. The Army had maintained an important outpost here prior to the Civil War, as a defense against Comanche depredations.

As Hatfield halted his wagon on the outskirts of the camp, following the lead of the rest of Vass' drivers, he saw other wagon outfits camped here ahead of them, including Del Prescott's modest three-wagon train.

Outspanning was a routine geared to an efficiency born of experience. Hatfield, copying his fellow drivers, quickly unharnessed his ten-horse team and led the animals down to the springs to water. He noticed that the drivers worked as quietly as possible, keeping their voices low so as not to disturb the other mulewhackers camped here.

FROM Vass, the Ranger learned that the various freight outfits did their cooking and sleeping in adobe ruins which marked the old cavalry barracks. It was a relief to Hatfield to hear this. It meant that he would not have to spread his blanket roll in the same vicinity as Del Prescott, whose wagons had pulled into Cavalry Springs two hours ahead of Lepperd's.

The freight teams were staked out on the far side of a grove of cottonwoods near the water hole, and Vass appointed night guards to remuda duty and to serve as watchmen for the wagons. Some of these wagons, including the one Vass himself drove, contained cargoes of kegged whisky, hardware and other merchandise which might attract thieves.

Putting his saddle horse on hobbles, Hatfield carried Goldy's saddle and his own bedroll over to a roofless barracks building where the Lepperd men camped. Dawn was just breaking over the eastern skyline when one of Vass' swampers who worked as trail cook summoned them to breakfast.

Full daylight had come to Cavalry Springs by the time the crew had finished eating and were arranging their bedrolls on the rammed-earth floor of the barracks house. The high adobe walls would give them shade during the hot day ahead.

From the doorway of the barrack shell, Hatfield caught sight of Del Prescott and his small crew hunkering around a campfire near an adjacent building. It was doubtful if the Ranger would see Mary Miles' fiance during the daylight hours. For Prescott, bone-weary from his own overnight haul from Rio Vista, would spend the day sleeping and resting like the other freighters.

Reassured, Hatfield shucked boots and gun harness, stretched out under his own soogans, and sleep was upon him.

When he awoke, hours later, the sun was far to the westward. The guttural voices of six of Vass' wagoneers, playing monte on a spread-out blanket at the far end of the barrack, had roused the Lone Wolf.

Before he had his blankets rolled the cook shouted for the crew to "come and get it." On his way to the cookfire with the other drivers, Hatfield heard a swamper drawl to Bill Vass:

"Ain't that the chief who just rode in, Boss?"

Hatfield's pulses jumped as he turned. A lone horseman was watering a big copper-bottomed gelding at Cavalry Springs. He was still in saddle, talking to a freighter who was busy filling canteens and waterbags.

The rider was Raoul Lepperd. The other man was Del Prescott.

Hatfield thought, What could have brought Lepperd so far from Rio Vista? and he felt a rime of cool perspiration wet his cheeks as one disturbing possibility came to him. If, by some wild chance, Lepperd and Jeb Musto *had* been in cahoots, the fugitive blacksmith could have tipped off Lepperd that the new blacksmith he had hired was a Texas Ranger, incognito. If Musto had been around all day, he would have had plenty of opportunity to do that, after he had recognized Goldy.

Hatfield saw Bill Vass break away from the grub line forming before the mulligan kettles over the cookfire, and head out toward the springs to confer with his boss.

Lepperd was dismounting now, still in earnest conversation with young Prescott. Sunset glow caught the gleam of polished ivory on Prescott's gun butt, a gun that just might be a seven-shooter.

That conversation out there was making the Ranger do considerable wondering. But perhaps it was no more than the perfectly innocent passing of the time of day between two freight bosses who had met accidentally at a common water hole used by their respective outfits.

On the other hand, Hatfield had not yet been able to shake off the hunch that Del Prescott might have been the mysterious silhouetted gunman who had rescued Jeb Musto from the law that night in Madero. Once Prescott had worked for Raoul Lepperd. What if they were still working together — at smuggling

counterfeit money?

It seemed a pretty far-fetched idea, especially concerning a man who was so proud of possessing a reputation that was above reproach. Still, Jim Hatfield had seen stranger things during the course of his Ranger career.

He gulped down his hot coffee without tasting it, as he watched Bill Vass join Prescott and Lepperd at the springs. Prescott nodded to Vass and headed off in the direction of his own camp, loaded down with canteens.

LEPPERD, apparently, was not intending to join his crew at the cookfire. He led his gelding around the muddy rim of the water hole and disappeared behind the tangle of cottonwoods and lacy tamarisks at the far side of the pool. He and Vass had not exchanged a dozen words.

Vass, walking rapidly, was returning to his own camp site. As the wagon boss strode up, his gaze shuttling rapidly around his crew, his eyes came to rest on Jim Hatfield.

Halting a dozen yards away, Vass barked hoarsely, "You, the new driver on Wagon Eight — what's your name? I want to see you."

Hatfield set down his untouched supper plate, aware that the other drivers were staring at him curiously. He felt a tightening sensation in his belly muscles as he sauntered out to where Bill Vass stood waiting, thumbs hooked in shell belts.

"Boss wants to see you about the blacksmithing job, feller," Vass said. "He's got some instructions he didn't give you when you were in Rio Vista yesterday."

Knots of muscle swelled at the corners of Hatfield's jaws. Vass was lying. A man of Lepperd's importance would not have made a thirty-mile ride in the heat of a Texas summer just to overtake a blacksmith he had hired. If he'd had any orders to transmit, he would have sent somebody with them.

"Sure, Boss." Hatfield shrugged. His suspense increased as Bill Vass fell in step beside him. "I hope Mr. Lepperd ain't changed his mind about hiring me. Jobs are pretty scarce this time of year."

Vass did not answer. His face was a grim, inscrutable mask as the two headed toward the cottonwood grove behind which Raoul Lepperd was waiting.

Their route carried them past Del Prescott's three Pittsburg freight wagons, loaded with baled wool. Prescott's drivers had hitched up the horses and driven the wagons over from the parking ground on the far side of the Cavalry Springs camp. At the moment, the wagons were unattended. Prescott and his men were eating supper in front of the barracks building they had pre-empted. The wagons were ready to start rolling for Madero at dusk.

Passing Prescott's lead wagon, Hatfield caught sight of something which put an icy sensation down his backbone. It was such a tiny detail it might ordinarily have escaped his notice entirely. But he was on the alert now.

The right front wheel of Prescott's wagon had a bullet-splintered spoke, close to the felly. And as if further to confirm the fantastic truth of his discovery, Hatfield saw telltale black smudges on other spokes which he recognized for what they were—Jeb Musto's life blood, staining the unpainted hickory!

He had but the briefest of glimpses at that wagon wheel, but the impact on him was stunning. Still, no change of expression or break of stride betrayed that he had made a startling discovery as he and Vass walked on past the Prescott wagon.

But the truth was as obvious as it was perplexing. Some time since Bill Vass' wagon had reached Cavalry Springs, the right front wheel had been switched to the same axle on Del Prescott's big Pittsburg.

Why? Jacking up a heavily loaded freight wagon and removing a wheel, exchanging it for an identical wheel off a wagon belonging to a rival freight line must have required the labor of at least two men. But Vass had assigned two night guards to the train. They could have furnished the manpower to affect the

switch in wheels.

But what possible reason could there have been for such an act? Hatfield's bullet had not damaged Vass' wheel enough to have necessitated replacing a damaged wheel with a sound one. Besides, why take Del Prescott's wheel when every Lepperd wagon carried a spare wheel lashed to its box?

Hatfield tried to fathom the thing, but answers would not come. Those that did were foolish—like, maybe Vass was superstitious about driving a wagon which had a wheel stained with a dead man's blood. An explanation like that just didn't make sense.

THE only thing that came out right was that a switch in wheels *had* been made. And the Ranger was recalling that after their arrival here at Cavalry Springs there had been nearly two hours of darkness during which the Lepperd night watchmen could have done the job.

His mind absorbed with the puzzle, Hatfield was caught by surprise just as he and Bill Vass were entering a shaded trail threading through the two-acre grove of cottonwoods on their way to join Raoul Lepperd.

Without warning, Vass halted, jerked a gun from holster and lifted it to cover Hatfield.

The Ranger blinked, meeting the level strike of Vass' eyes.

"What's the idea drawing a gun on me, Boss?"

Vass grinned coldly. "You know the answer to that one, Hatfield. Why did you hire out in my outfit as a blacksmith, when you're packing a Ranger star?"

Hatfield felt his flesh crawl before the threat of the gun in Vass' fist. He had not yet figured out this raw-boned wagon boss, or just how Vass stood with Lepperd. But this was a showdown. Here inside the cottonwood grove, they were out of sight of any of the freighters grouped around their supper fires.

"Sure, I'm a Ranger," Hatfield acknowledged frankly. "How did you get wise, Vass?"

Vass' trigger finger seemed to relax. "Lepperd just told me. That's what he wants to see you about, Hatfield. Goes against Raoul's grain, having a tin star snooping around under cover while he's on our pay-roll as a blacksmith."

Hatfield forced himself to grin. There were three answers as to how Lepperd had arrived at the knowledge of his true identity, none of them conducive to Hatfield's peace of mind right now.

If Lepperd could have been the gunman who had rescued Jeb Musto in Madero, he might have recognized Hatfield when the Ranger visited his office in Rio Vista yesterday. That was one possibility. Or perhaps, as Hatfield had thought before, Musto had tipped off Lepperd as to his new blacksmith's identity.

The third answer seemed the most likely one. Del Prescott, recognizing Hatfield here, from a distance, had told Lepperd. Except that that did not solve the reason for Lepperd's ride north.

"I can explain things to Lepperd," Hatfield said. "Sure, I trailed Jeb Musto to Mexico yesterday. I'm not blaming Lepperd because one of his blacksmiths turned out to be a smuggler."

Hatfield's good-natured candor seemed to put the ramrod at ease. For a moment he stared piercingly at the Ranger, then slowly he thrust his Colt back into leather.

"*'Sta bueno,*" he said. "As long as you weren't trying to do anything that would hurt the boss. You'll find him at the other side of the cottonwood timber, waiting for you. As soon as he's through with you, rattle your hocks back to camp. I still need you to drive that wagon out."

Hatfield agreed in the most casual of voices and turned away. Bill Vass had taken one stride back in the direction of the barracks when the Ranger's voice arrested him in his tracks.

"Wait a minute, Vass!"

Bill Vass turned, then froze as he saw himself under a gun drop.

"Turn around, Vass, arms reaching."

Vass' face turned chalky. He started to speak, then thought better of it and slowly turned his back to Hatfield.

"Sorry, Vass." As he spoke, Hatfield lifted his sixgun and brought the barrel down in a chopping arc to the back of Vass' skull. The wagon train boss sprawled headlong in the leaf mold of the trail without uttering a sound.

Wiping a smear of crimson from his gun muzzle, Hatfield headed out of the cottonwoods, making for the Prescott wagons. He did not slow down as he passed the lead Pittsburgh. He merely wanted a second and closer look at the bloodstains and the bullet nick on one of the spokes, to settle in his mind the indisputable fact that, for some reason, Lepperd's night guards had exchanged wagon wheels with Prescott.

But the mystery of *why* those wheels had been switched was no longer a mystery in Ranger Hatfield's mind. Not now, when he knew that his identity was no longer a secret. Somebody — and that somebody could as well be Raoul Lepperd as anyone else—knowing that a Ranger was around, must have rightly guessed that those wagons would be searched with a thoroughness that would make the Customs men look like amateurs. That somebody had got rid of evidence that could be damning. The same somebody had wanted to pass the buck, if there was a buck, to Del Prescott.

But what was it? There must be something about that wheel that had been put on Prescott's wagon, something more than the evidence of Musto's death. But what it could be Hatfield could not imagine. It certainly called for more investigating, and that Jim Hatfield meant to do at the first opportunity. Probably he would have to make his opportunity, but that would be nothing new. The Lone Wolf usually had to do that.

Clues didn't often walk up and hit a man in the face. Like that seven-shot gun, say. Finding out about that was more a combination of subconsciousness and luck than anything else. His guardian angel, maybe, giving him a nudge when his senses were hanging between heaven and earth, as it were—and the lucky chance that old Levi Shapiro was a friend of his.

Still, none of it was telling him what was off-color about that wheel—if anything. He knew no more about it now than he had known before he got his hunch.

But he would—he would. He was sure of that. For he was still alive, which he might not have been by now if he had fatuously gone on to meet Raoul Lepperd. Because there was no doubt in the Ranger's mind but that Vass had been leading him to certain death, facing Lepperd.

Perhaps Vass had not been aware of that, but Hatfield had known he could take no chances. Lepperd's ride across the heat-baked Texas malpais today to overtake the northbound freight wagons, had convinced Hatfield that his life was in danger here at Cavalry Springs.

Because, if Lepperd had a clean conscience in this deal, he would not have had any reason to object to having a Rang-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

Beat by a Hare

SOME years ago the cowpokes of two neighboring Texas ranches were engaged in a baseball game. The playing field was rough and the grass uncut. It was the last inning and the score tied when a most remarkable but true event took place. With a man on second base, the batter hit a short Texas leaguer that rolled into a rabbit hole.

The man on base was rounding third and headed for home when the shortstop raced to where the ball had rolled. He stuck his hand in the hole, but instead of the ball, he pulled out a rabbit —and threw the runner out by a hare!

—*Al Spong*

er on his pay-roll.

Jim Hatfield knew now that he had been right in subconsciously suspecting Raoul Lepperd. He had tried to force his conviction aside, probably because of the freight line owner's reputation for integrity, acquired through years of business dealings. But it had been there all the time. It would not down.

Hatfield was as certain that in some manner Raoul Lepperd was involved in that fake gold eagle smuggling, and that the man would do anything on earth to prevent that from becoming known, as he was that the man had been waiting—was waiting right now—in those cottonwoods to kill him.

All that was left for him to do now was to prove it. That was *all*.

VII

RETURNING to the camp, Jim Hatfield veered away from the rest of the crew who were still wolfing down their suppers and went directly to the barrack. He emerged carrying his saddle and bedroll.

A few of the men stared after the new man as he headed out toward the bedground where the horses were on picket. The screening cottonwoods would keep Raoul Lepperd from seeing him, Hatfield knew. But at any moment the freight line owner might come riding over to investigate Vass' delay in bringing Hatfield from camp—and discover his unconscious ramrod lying on the trail.

There was still Del Prescott to consider. Over his shoulder, Hatfield could see Prescott and his men dousing their cookfire, preparatory to heading to their wagons. As yet, Prescott apparently had not noticed Hatfield's departure.

Reaching the bedground, Hatfield was relieved to find the remuda unguarded. A low rise of ground shielded him from the view of the camp now. There was no one to see him hightailing out of camp.

Saddling in feverish haste, Hatfield mounted Goldy and put the big sorrel into a reaching gallop. He did not pull down to a traveling gait until he had put a mile between him and Cavalry Springs.

Reining northward toward Madero then, the lights of which after awhile began to twinkle on the remote horizon, Hatfield keened the night breeze. He heard no sound of pursuit from the direction of the freight camp. The landscape was rapidly darkening, the sky ablaze with myriad stars. Even in the event of a chase, Hatfield felt safe now, with Goldy fresh.

Keeping the golden stallion at a steady lope, he figured he could make it to Madero by midnight. The wagons would not arrive short of three in the morning. Del Prescott's string probably would be the first to arrive.

Then the stage would be set for a reckoning with Sheriff Mary Miles' intended husband.

When Jim Hatfield rode in from the south, shortly before twelve o'clock sounded from the clock tower of the Catclaw County courthouse, saloon lights made a blaze of color on Madero's Main Street.

Hitching Goldy in a bosque of post oaks on one corner of the courthouse plaza, the Ranger headed toward the jailhouse office. A gleam of light there indicated that he would find Sheriff Mary still on duty.

Rounding the corner of the jail, Hatfield had a clear view of the interior of the office. Mary, once more in man's clothing, was seated at her father's desk doing paper work of some kind.

The jingle of Hatfield's spurs in the open doorway brought the girl sheriff wheeling around in her swivel chair. Recognizing the Lone Wolf, she came to her feet, anxiety and curiosity in her eyes.

"Jim! Where on earth have you been? You dropped out of sight so suddenly the other day!"

Hatfield grinned bleakly. "I've been to El Paso, and to Rio Vista," he said, accepting her hand. "I've got good news for you, Mary."

"You—tracked down Jeb Musto?"

"In Rio Vista, yesterday. Mary, we shot

it out. On the Mexican side. What I wanted to tell you—Musto confessed your father's murder before he cashed in his chips."

Tears glistened suddenly in her eyes. She sat down limply, staring up at the Ranger.

"I—I feel all dead inside," she whispered hoarsely. "I guess I'm just realizing—that revenge is a pretty hollow thing. It doesn't bring Dad back."

Hatfield said gently, "No, but it does free you from wearing a sheriff's star, Mary. I hope you'll quit while you're ahead. It's a risky business, toting a law badge in this corner of Texas."

MARY dabbed at her eyes with her neck scarf.

"I know, Jim. Del and I have so much to thank you for.—Jim, Del is due in from Rio Vista before daylight. Does he know—about Musto?"

Hatfield shook his head. "No. I saw Del in Rio Vista while his wagons were undergoing inspection. Musto and I didn't tangle until after Del left Mexico on his way north."

Hatfield's brow furrowed, as abruptly it dawned on him how he could use Mary to advantage tonight. As a decoy to get Prescott away from his wagon yard as soon as the wagons pulled in she would be perfect. He *had* to examine that wheel on Prescott's lead wagon, and the sooner the better. And that would be before the Lepperd wagons arrived.

"Mary," Hatfield said, "I've got a couple of favors to ask of you. One of them is, when Del gets back to town, don't let him know I'm in Madero. It's important that no one knows where I am for the next day or two. Will you give me your word of honor that you'll keep that a secret even from the man you're going to marry?"

She smiled, fingering the bandages on her gun hand.

"Of course, Jim," she told him. "But why, if I may ask? How can I let Del know I'm going to resign as sheriff at last, without letting him know that Musto is dead. He'll know I've seen you, won't he? And know that *you* told me about Musto?"

Hatfield shrugged. "There's a telegraph line between Madero and Rio Vista. If the authorities down on the Border haven't notified you before now that your escaped prisoner was tracked down and killed, they should have. And they will, soon."

Mary nodded. "I see." She looked up. "You said two favors."

"The other," Hatfield said, "is for you not to wait up until Del's wagons get here. Tell his hostler to send him around to your house just as soon as he shows up."

A puzzled smile touched Mary's lips. "But why not meet him myself, Jim?"

Hatfield thought fast, but could see no way to take this girl sheriff into his confidence—not now. He said enigmatically, "I can't go into details right now, but let's put it this way. I may have to put one of Del's muleskinner's under arrest when his wagons show up. I'd rather have Del out of the way."

A troubled frown notched Mary Miles' forehead. "You mean someone on Del's pay-roll may be mixed up with smuggling?"

"Possibly. Anyway, I'd like a clear field when his wagons get here. By tomorrow noon I should be able to put all my cards on the table, Mary."

She stood up and reached for her stetson. "All right, Jim. But in case your suspicion is correct, in case one of Del's men is a *contrabandista*, you don't have any doubts as to Del's honesty, do you?"

Hatfield hoped she could not read doubt in his eyes as he said, "Of course not. Put your mind to rest on that score, Mary. If Del should ask about what became of me, just tell him I went back to Marfa the other day."

Mary blew out her office light and locked the door behind her as they walked out into the night. Hatfield faded into the shadows as he saw her strike out in the direction of Del Prescott's wagon yard, to leave her instructions with the night hostler. . . .

The courthouse clock was chiming

three when Jim Hatfield heard a rumble of wheels and hooves and saw Prescott's three heavily loaded Pittsburg wagons turn in off Main Street. They halted alongside the young freighter's storage shed.

Hatfield, bellied down between the foundation timbers of the repair shop, was not a dozen feet from where the dusty wagons came to a halt. The freighters were greeted by the night hostler, a game-legged oldster whose job it was to unhitch the three teams and bed them down here at journey's end.

"Boss," the old hostler greeted Del Prescott as the young wagoneer alighted from the lead Pittsburg, "Mary left word she wants you to come over to the house just as soon as you get in."

Prescott gave a startled exclamation. "This time of night? Is anything wrong, Pete?"

THE hostler, already at work unhooking tug straps from single-trees, chuckled. "Not that I know of, Del. She said tell you this was her last day behind a sheriff's star—and she wanted you to know that before you hit the hay."

Del Prescott let out an excited whoop. Without tarrying for anything he struck off in the direction of the gates opening onto Main Street.

Hatfield remained in hiding during the few minutes it took Pete to unhitch the three teams and lead them off in the direction of the barn. It would take the hostler at least an hour to feed and curry the three spans, probably longer. The drivers of the second and third wagons had already vanished, their chores finished for this run. Relief drivers would be tooling Prescott's wagons when they went on to El Paso in the morning.

When Pete had vanished inside the horse barn with the three harness teams in tow, Hatfield crawled out from under the repair shop and made his way directly to Prescott's lead wagon. The dusty wheel on the right front axle was vividly limned in the light of a late-rising moon, and told Hatfield what he wanted to know. It was the same blood-stained, bullet-splintered wheel which had started the journey from Mexico to Cavalry Springs on Bill Vass' lead wagon for the Lepperd outfit.

Slung under the wagon box was a heavy wooden jack, used by freighters on the road whenever it became necessary to replace a damaged wheel with the spare carried at all times. Getting the jack in place under the front axle, Hatfield put his weight on the big wooden handle and levered the wheel until its tire cleared the dirt.

A moment's fishing in the jockey box nailed to the side of the Pittsburg and Hatfield had located the hub-nut wrench. It was short work, then, to remove the mysterious wheel and trundle it over to one side.

For a moment Hatfield debated whether to replace the wheel with the spare. As yet, he was not at all sure of what he was doing. He was merely riding his hunch in removing the wheel for closer inspection. But he finally decided to let the wagon remain perched on the jack. Even if Prescott's visit with Mary took only a few minutes, the freighter would not hang around the wagon yard on his return. He would head straight for his shack and bed, after that long trip.

Pete, the hostler, would be too busy grooming the teams to come out and go nosing around the yard long enough to discover that a wheel was missing from the lead wagon.

Keeping to the deep shadow of the warehouse, the Lone Wolf trundled the heavy wheel away from the wagon yard, and into the narrow alley alongside Jeb Musto's blacksmith shop. At the back door, Hatfield took the padlock key which Lepperd had given him in Rio Vista, unlocked the door and rolled it open. Quickly he trundled the wagon wheel inside and closed the door.

Striking a match, Hatfield saw a lantern hanging near the forge. The walls of the blacksmith shop were lined with tarpaper, so the Ranger felt safe in working here with a lighted lantern.

Leaning the wagon wheel against the anvil, Hatfield placed the lantern on a tool box and hunkered down to begin an inch-by-inch inspection of the wheel which had been switched from Vass' wagon to Prescott's the night before at Cavalry Springs.

To all outward appearances, it seemed to be a regulation wheel. Only the bloodstains and the bullet furrow made it of special significance to Hatfield.

Selecting a farrier's rasp from Musto's tool rack, the Ranger began running the wooden handle around the wheel, spoke by spoke, as a bow might drag a stick along a picket fence. Each spoke in turn —there were eighteen in all—gave off the clean, sharp click of kiln-seasoned hickory socketed firmly between hub and felloe.

All except one. The third spoke clockwise from the one in which Hatfield's bullet had made a nick down in Rio Vista. That third spoke gave off a dull, thudding noise, distinctly different from the others.

EXCITEMENT touched Hatfield now. His hunch showed signs of paying off!

Trundling the wheel over to the workbench, he locked it at right angles from the bench by means of a vise. Then, with a mallet and a blunt chisel, he knocked off the iron bands which rimmed the outer edges of the hub. Now he was able to remove the pipelike iron sleeve which formed a bearing for the axle.

Its metal parts removed, the wagon wheel hub now consisted of a series of wedge-shaped blocks of hardwood which, when assembled and fastened together with the outer metal rims, formed a wooden circle in which the wagon spokes were set. Hatfield had seen blacksmiths dismantle a wagon wheel often enough to know that this was the method by which a broken spoke could be replaced without taking a wheel completely apart.

It was a simple matter now, using the mallet, to knock out the segment of hub which held the questionable third spoke. A few minutes of twisting and the spoke came free of its socket in the rim.

Even as he hefted the loose spoke, Hatfield knew it was heavier than an ordinary hickory spoke should be. Noticeably heavier, as if it had a leaden core.

Carrying the spoke over to the lantern, Hatfield inspected its top and bottom ends closely. An auger had been used to drill a hole down the center of the spoke, its upper end had been neatly plugged with a hardwood stopper, slotted like a screwhead. With the spoke in place on the wheel, the slotted plug was concealed inside the felly, under the tire.

Using the end of a chisel as a screwdriver, Hatfield twisted the plug, felt it yield. It could be unscrewed, like a bolt made of wood.

With the plug removed, Hatfield turned the hole exposed to the full glare of the lanternlight. Two inches inside the hole, bright yellow-red metal gleamed. And Jim Hatfield recognized it for what it was—a counterfeit U. S. ten-dollar gold coin!

Here was the answer to the smuggling riddle which had baffled the Mexican and American authorities for over a decade! Here was how the Gold Eagle counterfeit gang had been shipping their bogus coins north of the Rio Grande, under the noses of vigilant guards!

Hatfield's hands were trembling with excitement as he upended the hollowed-out wagon spoke, to let a tinkling stream of spurious gold coins cascade onto the earthen floor of the blacksmith shop. This was how Jeb Musto had come into possession of the gold he had hidden under a snubbing post in the corral out back!

VIII

WHEN the last coin had fallen out of the hollow wagon wheel spoke, leaving the wooden shaft noticeably lighter in weight, Hatfield hunkered down again and began stacking up the counterfeit coins like a gambler would stack poker chips.

When he had finished, he made a quick count. He thought, Two hundred and fifty of 'em. Twenty-five-hundred dollars' worth—the same amount Musto bur-

ied under that snugging post the night Mary Miles arrested him.

Lepperd and Prescott, between them, operated a fleet of wagons which crossed the Mexican border more than once a week. Small wonder the counterfeiters had run their shipments over the million mark in recent years, assuming that one wagon in every freight train carried this wheel; or maybe others carried one or more similar to it.

Hatfield knew he could not be sure unless he could examine every wheel on every wagon in both fleets, and that would be impossible. But for the present, this one was enough. Somebody would be on the lookout for the counterfeit coins in this wheel.

He began sliding the stacks of imitation gold coins—they were gold plate over lead, actually—back into the hollowed-out wagon wheel spoke.

He thought, With Musto gone, somebody on the Texas side of the Border *has* to collect this shipment. And now my job is to catch him red-handed.

He tried not to think that Del Prescott was the logical man to handle the bogus money hidden so ingeniously, though the wheel had been on Del's wagon. It had not been there, originally. The coins had been placed in the spoke when the wheel had been on a Lepperd wagon. The switch had been made at Cavalry Springs.

Since Hatfield's suspicion that Lepperd was out to kill him, he thought instantly of the big importer, too, and he had his own ideas about the reason for the exchange of wheels. But he still had no proof; only suspicion and theories.

It was the same where Del Prescott was concerned. Though it did relieve his mind a little to ask himself—if Prescott was to handle the delivery of the counterfeit money, why had not the wheel with the hollowed-out spoke been installed on his wagon down in Mexico?

Screwing the wooden plug back into the end of the spoke, Hatfield found one answer even to that. Prescott's wagons plied only as far south as Rio Vista, Mexico; Lepperd's Conestogas ranged into Mexico as far as Hermosillo. If the counterfeit money was minted in the Chihuahua capital, then there wouldn't have been a chance to put the wheel on a Prescott wagon until both fleets were on the American side, when the switch had been made.

The Ranger didn't like the way that theory worked up so logically to involve Sheriff Mary Miles fiancé. But there it was.

Working with feverish haste, Hatfield reinstalled the missing spoke to the vise-held wheel, assembled the hub, and trundled the wheel back to the blacksmith shop back door.

He blew out the lantern, slid open the door, and stood for moments scouting the moonlit alley alongside the Prescott freight yards. The windows of Del Prescott's living quarters, where the Ranger himself had slept, were dark. Young Del had not yet returned from Mary's home. In the rear of the yard, lanternlight gleamed inside the barn where the old hostler was still busy bedding down the teams for the night.

Swiftly Hatfield rolled the wheel back to Prescott's big lead Pittsburgh, lifted it onto the axle and tightened the hub cap. He replaced the hub wrench in the jockey box, lowered the jack and returned it to its leather sling.

Then, using his stetson brim for a broom, he carefully erased his own footprints and the tracks the wagon tire had made when he had rolled it over to the blacksmith shop. He had left no telltale sign behind for Del Prescott, or any other emissary of the smuggling ring to see when daylight came.

That done, Hatfield crawled back under the repair shop and settled down to wait. He meant to maintain a vigil on that wagon wheel until someone came to remove it from the wagon.

But had the Ranger only suspected it, all of his carefully surreptitious work had not gone unobserved. Naturally, though, he had no way of knowing that a shadowy figure was concealed in a dark corner near the wagon yard gates, a crouched shape that had materialized there just as

Hatfield had emerged from Musto's shop to approach the jacked-up wagon.

NOR could Jim Hatfield have any prescience that this man's first thought had been to kill the Ranger on sight. But even as his hand was lifting his gun from holster, he had paused. Another thought had occurred to him. This Hatfield probably had divulged his suspicions to Sheriff Mary Miles, and should the Lone Wolf die here, she would know who had killed him. Too, gun shots would arouse the town, and there would be little chance of putting Mary out of the way also, soon enough to silence her and not himself be recognized.

No, the watching, waiting man decided, there was a better way.

Slipping backward through the gate, his shadowy figure moved swiftly behind the board fence of the wagon yard and on across the street to where a lather-drenched saddle horse was hitched to a post oak. Mounting, the rider faded as quietly as possible back from the street. At a safe distance he spurred across lots in the direction of Mary Martha Miles' cottage on that back lane.

He was in time to see Del Prescott kissing the girl sheriff good night. Across the still air the young freighter's voice carried distinctly:

"You take care of arranging things with the parson, honey. Tell him we'll be married soon as I get back from El Paso."

The rider waited until Prescott, whistling cheerfully, had turned the corner of Main Street. Then, spurring quickly out of the box elder thicket across the street, he reined up at Mary's gate where the moon shone brightly on the neat sign:

SHERIFF'S RESIDENCE

Inside the cottage, Mary had blown out the parlor lamp and was moving toward her bedroom when she heard the chime of spur rowels on the front porch, followed by a light knock on the door.

She thought amusedly, That Del! I'll bet he's come back to insist on us getting married today, before he takes the wagons over to 'Paso.

Wholly unsuspicious as she unbolted and opened the door, Mary Miles was caught off-guard when she faced the tall man with a stetson pulled forward to shadow his face, waiting there. Before she could draw back, both her wrists were trapped in the man's tight grip.

"Don't scream, Sheriff." The voice was low-pitched, venom-laden. "Don't make me get rough."

Mary felt less of panic than disgust at allowing herself to be trapped by some man she believed was a drunk she probably had once jailed. Liquored up again, he was bent on reprisal for his humiliation. This went with wearing the star in a town like Madero, an expected hazard of the job.

"Let go of me!" she flared, struggling impotently to break her attacker's grip. "What do you want anyway, this time of night?"

The man hauled her out onto the porch. "You're coming with me, Miss Miles. I'm plumb sorry I have to do this. But you won't be hurt if you do just as I tell you."

She recognized now the real danger in which she stood, and with that recognition, fear put a chill down her spine.

"Why, you're—" she cried, but her furious accusation was shut off sharply by the arm that went around her neck, and the big hand clapped over her mouth.

"No names," the man growled. "Even 'way out here, and at this time of night, you can't tell who might hear."

His other hand reached up to unpin the sheriff's badge from her shirt. He dropped the silver star into his coat pocket.

"Let's put it this way," he muttered. "You're my ace in the hole for a showdown I've got coming with somebody who has crossed me, maybe young Prescott, say.— Stand still, now. I've got to gag you and blindfold you."

He spoke confidently, but he could not guess that even as the words fell from his lips Mary Miles did not believe one of them. She *would* not believe Del Prescott

could possibly be involved with this man or anybody else that could call for a showdown, or could question his honor or honesty.

Mary Miles, too, was as clever as she was courageous, and now her mind was working lightning-swift. This man—the last in the world she would ever have dreamed would do a thing like this—must have a deeper reason than he'd said for kidnaping her. And in the next brain flash she thought she knew what it was!

MUSTO had never known that Rocky Miles had lived long enough to name his killer. But this man, more clever than Musto, must suspect that old Rocky had told her, Mary, something that would be dangerous to him, maybe something connected with the smuggling—it *would* be that! — and he meant to find out now what it was. Before he killed her. For she was certain that was what he meant to do. First, make her talk. Find out what her father had told her, and find out what, if anything, she had told Ranger Jim Hatfield.

Well—let him try! Just let him!

His harsh voice came to her, muffled.

"Stand still, I told you!"

Mary would never know how close her thoughts had come to being a perfect reading of this man's mind. Only, one thing motivating him she had missed, and that had been because of course she knew nothing of his having so recently seen the Lone Wolf with the wagon wheel that told so much—and so little. Mary could not even guess that her kidnaper was determined to force from her whether Hatfield had told her and Del Prescott that this horrible man who was gripping her so tightly was the head of the Gold Eagle smuggling ring.

And she had guessed right. He did mean for her to die, but not before she could pass along to him anything Hatfield had told her—Hatfield himself and Prescott had to go, too, of course. But before that happened, there were some things this abductor of the girl sheriff in the night had to know!

His only chance lay in scotching the chance of an open accusation at its source. . . .

From his hiding place under Prescott's repair shed, Ranger Jim Hatfield caught sight of Bill Vass' ten-wagon train pulling in from Mexico just as day broke over the eastern mountains. The lumbering freighters swung into Lepperd's enclosure on the far side of the blacksmith shop, to be met by sleepy hostlers waiting to take over the unhitching chores from the gaunted drivers.

Bill Vass, Hatfield observed, was wearing a turban of bandage around his bruised skull, under his hat. He heard the ramrod call to the boss hostler:

"Lepperd leave any word for me before he went to the hotel, Pedro?"

The hostler's answer came distinctly to the hidden Ranger:

"I have not seen Señor Lepperd in weeks, that is so."

Vass cuffed back his stetson and appeared to be thinking about something.

"He rode on ahead of us last night," he finally said. "Must have gone straight to the hotel. Anyhow, tell the crew we're pulling out for Socorro early. Lost time getting away from Cavalry Springs last night."

Quiet settled down as daylight brightened over Madero. Vass' reference to Raoul Lepperd coming on north to Madero intrigued Hatfield. It was so obvious that Lepperd, having let the lawman slip out of his grasp at Cavalry Springs, had come on to Madero in search of him.

An hour after sunrise, Hatfield saw Prescott's hostler, old Pete, limp over to Del's shanty and go inside. The stable tender's shrill old voice reached the Ranger:

"Don't see any call for taking the wagon out yourself, Boss. You ain't had more'n two hours sleep!"

Del Prescott appeared in the doorway, fully dressed, his face haggard from lack of rest.

"Got a deadline to meet in El Paso, Pete, with that load in the lead wagon. It's got to be delivered by tomorrow morning!"

Pete came outside to join his boss. "Then send one of the other boys. You're working yourself to a frazzle, making daylight hauls this time of year."

Del Prescott ran splayed fingers through his touseled hair. "Can't help it. This is a rush order. Wholesaler's waiting for that wool. It's overdue as it is."

He went back inside, but rejoined Pete a moment later, buckling on his gunbelts.

"I'll rustle over to the Chinaman's for breakfast," he told the hostler. "Have the team ready to go when I get back. And stride jauntily out of the wagon yard and disappear. Old Pete trudged back to the barn and emerged shortly with a fresh team of Morgans for the lead wagon.

A half-hour later, when Prescott came back, his wagon was ready to roll. He climbed aboard, accepted the lines from Pete, swung the Pittsburg around and out the gates to Main Street. There he swung west on the El Paso road.

Hatfield waited until Pete had left for breakfast before crawling out from under the wagon shop. And he did it wearily,

"He's ticklish!"

when Mary shows up, you might tell her I'm going to stop in 'Paso for a day, to buy a wedding ring. We're going to get hitched, Pete."

Pete grinned toothlessly. "Meaning she's going to quit sheriffing!"

"She's going to resign today, Pete—turn her chores over to the deputy. Didn't I let the town know there wouldn't be no wedding as long as she was sheriff?"

HATFIELD was aware of his own need for breakfast as he saw Del Prescott his spirits sagging like his shoulders. Because all of his suspicions of Del Prescott were back, as reluctant as he was to harbor them.

For now, one thing he was sure of. If Del Prescott was handling that spurious gold, and meant to deliver it, he had no intention of disposing of his counterfeit cargo here in Madero. El Paso would be the place, and he was in a hurry to get there, justifying his flimsy excuse to Pete about an urgent deadline.

In Madero, only one eating house was

open at this early hour—the Chinese restaurant. But Hatfield dared not enter and order a meal there. Bill Vass and his wagon crew were probably having their own breakfasts there now.

Hurrying back to the courthouse square where he had left Goldy, he checked the contents of the canteen he had filled at Cavalry Springs, and mounted. As he rode out of town he kept well away from Main Street.

His route took him past Mary Miles' house, and as always when his thoughts turned to the girl sheriff, he felt a stab of remorse at the heartbreak he might bring Mary in the course of performing his duty. He wished he had the same faith in Del Prescott that she had, for he was positive she had no inkling that he could be a link in the Gold Eagle smuggling mystery.

Some distance from town, Hatfield took dried jerky, a can of tomatoes and some stale biscuits from his saddlebags. This, washed down with water from his canteen, would have to serve for breakfast. There were no settlements between Madero and El Paso where he could get a meal.

By now, Del Prescott's lone wagon would be dragging a feather of dust a mile out of town. Hatfield put his stallion into an easy lope, swinging south to flank Prescott's route, too far away for the driver to recognize him if he chanced to spot a lone horseman out on the cactus flats.

The heat grew in intensity as the sun climbed up a cloudless Texas sky. Heat waves put a glassy shimmer over the land. The dust raised by Prescott's wagon made a long boiling yellow banner along the El Paso road.

It was Hatfield's purpose to keep Prescott's wagon in sight at all times, but from a mile's distance. The first time Prescott made a halt longer than the necessary stops to rest his horses, Hatfield would close in.

It would take Prescott at least half an hour to jack up his wheel and remove the counterfeit gold from the hollow spoke. The way Hatfield had it figured, Prescott would attend to that at some isolated point along the El Paso road, perhaps burying the specie at some prearranged point where an accomplice could pick it up at his leisure.

Around mid-morning, Hatfield topped a mesquite-dappled rise and saw that Del Prescott had halted his wagon at a bosque of palo verdes marking a water hole. For the past twenty minutes the wagon had been out of Hatfield's direct line of sight, due to an intervening rise of ground. But the boil of dust lifting into the sky had told him that Prescott had not stopped till now.

Wheeling Goldy around to put him below the skyline, Hatfield ground-hitched the sorrel and uncased his field-glasses. Then, making his way back to the hill-crest, he focused the lenses on the water hole, a quarter of a mile below.

Prescott had unhitched his team, leaving the wagon in the road, and at the moment was engaged in the perfectly innocent routine of letting his team drink sparingly from the mud-rimmed water hole.

Hunkered down behind a concealing clump of prickly pear, the Lone Wolf kept his glasses on young Prescott, watching the freighter lead his team back to the wagon and rehitch. Then Prescott unslung a bucket of axle grease which hung from the bull-bar and began greasing his wheels with a wooden paddle.

JIM HATFIELD relaxed, waiting. Out here in the center of this empty Texas wilderness, Prescott probably would feel no need to run his wagon into the palo verde thickets when he got around to transferring his shipment of counterfeit money to another hiding place. But the water hole seemed a logical landmark for such a maneuver. Twenty-five hundred dollars in gold coins was not bulky. It could be easily hidden under any convenient boulder or rammed down a gopher hole.

Prescott was greasing the right front wheel now, the one stained with Jeb Musto's blood. Hatfield saw the freighter bend

down to examine the bullet-splintered spoke, as if seeing it for the first time. And the way he was studying it, if Hatfield had not been so certain that Prescott knew all about that spoke and what one beside it contained, he would have sworn that the young wagoneer was intent on discovering the answer to some mystery about it.

Now it's coming, the Ranger thought, settling himself to wait. He had made up his mind to wait here until he had seen Prescott actually cache the counterfeit, then close in to make his arrest.

Prescott was swabbing grease on the axle, bending down with his back to the water hole thicket.

Suddenly, through the glasses, Hatfield saw the young wagoneer drop his grease bucket and jerk erect, hauling a sixgun from leather as he whirled about to face the water hole.

Then, unaccountably, Prescott made a running dive under his wagon, scuttling quickly between the far wheels to climb up on the wagon bax, clinging to the wagon sheet ropes with one hand.

Simultaneously there came to Hatfield's ears the distance-delayed crack of a Winchester, and he had his explanation for Prescott's sudden dive for cover.

Del Prescott was being ambushed by a gunman concealed by the water hole palo verdes!

Even as Hatfield held his high-powered binoculars on Prescott, he saw that the wagon man's left arm was hanging limp at his side. A spreading crimson stain was wetting Prescott's sleeve. A bullet had caught him high on the left arm or shoulder.

Hatfield swung his glasses toward the palo verdes. He saw a smudge of gunsmoke hanging on the motionless, superheated air, filtering up from the undergrowth beyond the water hole.

Then a movement in the bushes that would be invisible to Del Prescott from where he was clinging to the far side of the wagon, caught Hatfield's attention. The bushwhacker was scuttling through that thicket, trying to pick up the bayed wagoneer under his gunsights again.

Another blur of movement directed Hatfield's glasses to a claybanked gully on the far side of the water hole. A horse was standing there, a big copper-bottomed gelding. . .

Lepperd!

The name was a tortured cry in Hatfield's consciousness as he recognized the horse which the Rio Vista freight owner had been straddling at Cavalry Springs the night before.

The truth dawned on the Lone Wolf then. Raoul Lepperd had not spent the drag-end of the night in a Madero hotel, as his wagon foreman, Bill Vass, had assumed. Lepperd, like Hatfield, had trailed Del Prescott's wagon out of town this morning, and Lepperd had planted this gun trap at the water hole.

Hatfield thought instantly, Then Del isn't the one I'm after! He doesn't even know they switched wagon wheels on him the other night.

Even as that glad thought crossed Hatfield's brain, he caught sight of Raoul Lepperd. The big man was moving out into the open now, sunlight glinting on the blued barrel of a saddle carbine. He, too, had seen Prescott's curiosity about the wheel, and now he meant to put a stop to any further investigation—with lead.

Even if he had not followed Prescott with lethal intentions in the first place—he could have followed with some plan of getting that wheel into his possession—he had them now. Raoul Lepperd meant to kill Del Prescott here and now in cold blood!

Hatfield's thought was so clamorous he believed surely it must be heard by the two men at the water hole, Why, it's plain as a printed page! Lepperd's my smuggler! He aims to gun down Del Prescott to keep that wagon wheel from rolling all the way to El Paso before he can get a chance at it!

IT *HAD* to be that wheel that Lepperd was after. He must be certain that it would tie him up with the smuggling. And another thought came to the Ranger

—what if he himself had been seen when he had examined that wheel in the blacksmith shop? Or had been observed returning with it to the Prescott wagon?

Hatfield could not see any great significance in it if he had been seen—not yet—but he could see that Raoul Lepperd was willing to commit murder to get his hands on the wheel. The counterfeit money, in that man's mind, would mean nothing at all, even if he should lose it. The worth of the coins was negligible—but the smuggling ring itself brought tremendous profits, and apparently Lepperd was prepared to keep its secrets at all costs. And his snow-white reputation.

And Hatfield thought, Just another crook gone panicky. Why, the poor fool, don't he know that with the wheel on Prescott's wagon, and in view of that rep he's got, we wouldn't have a chance pinning the smuggling on *him*?

Hatfield smiled grimly. It was all right with him. He didn't mind letting Lepperd pin it on himself. But he *did* mind Lepperd's murdering Sheriff Mary Miles' intended husband in the process. He had to do something about that!

IX

QUICKLY Hatfield flung his field-glasses aside, to lunge back down the slope and yank his Winchester .45-70 from the scabbard under Goldy's saddle skirts. But with every plunging step, the last thing he had seen at the water hole was making his hackles rise. His glasses, centered on Del Prescott, had brought him into clear view as the husky young freighter lost his grip on the wagon sheet rope and tumbled limply to the ground, sprawling in the shade of the wagon.

His gunshot wound, and the terrible heat pounding down on him, had drained his strength until he had passed out. Now he lay there a helpless victim for Lepperd's close-range pay-off shot!

There was no time for Hatfield to get Goldy and close the range by riding closer, because at this very moment Raoul Lepperd already was stalking nearer to the sprawled form. It might be too late now to save Prescott!

Levering a shell into the breech, Hatfield charged back to the crest of the hill. Raoul Lepperd was calmly strolling around the back of the wagon.

Sinking to one knee, Jim Hatfield cuddled the walnut stock of the Winchester to his cheek, lining the sights on Lepperd as the big dry gulcher came to a halt, staring down at the motionless Prescott, rifle tucked under one arm. Apparently Lepperd saw no reason to hurry. The thought squeezed Hatfield's heart—perhaps Prescott was already dead!

But he had to take a chance, although it was a long shot—close to five hundred yards. There was no windage to allow for, but aiming for a high trajectory was essential. One slug had to count here.

Staring down the gunsights, Hatfield saw Raoul Lepperd move the lever of his carbine, thumb back the hammer. But before Lepperd could bring his rifle to bear on Prescott's huddled body, Hatfield squeezed off his desperation shot.

Through sifting powder smoke he saw his .45-70 slug kick up a spurt of dust, a good six feet behind Lepperd, but close enough to spray the ambusher's back with dirt.

Even as Raoul Lepperd spun around to face this surprise menace at his rear, Hatfield got off his second shot, a ricochet that screamed from the iron tire of a rear wagon wheel, missing its target by inches.

Lepperd fell into a crouch, his ears only then registering the first thunderous crash of the rifle on the ridge top. The blazing Texas sun was in the bushwhacker's eyes so it was impossible for him to tell how close the unseen marksman was to him.

Hatfield drove a third bullet on its sightless track through space as he saw Lepperd turn and, crouched low, begin a sprint past the wagon for the water hole. The Ranger's rifle-barrel swung to follow the fleeing killer, shooting in advance of the running target. But even so he knew that only a miracle would bring bullet and runner together at the same spot.

He saw Lepperd hurl his carbine aside as if to rid himself of unnecessary weight, sprinting like a jackrabbit as he passed the muddy edge of the water hole and ran on.

Hatfield's following bullet kicked up a sheet of spray from the surface of the pool. Another raked through the palo verdes, close enough to make Lepperd duck. Then, as Hatfield held his fire rather than empty his magazine of cartridges, he saw Lepperd gain the nearby barranca and vault aboard his gelding waiting there.

By the time Hatfield came to his feet, Leppard had vanished from view down the twisting throat of the barranca. The gully would hide his getaway for a good half-mile, but Hatfield could see the dust smoking up from the galloping hooves, billowing above the cutbank rims.

There was still no time to lose. Hatfield whistled up Goldy, took only the necessary moments to reload his Winchester, then leaped into saddle. He sent the big sorrel pounding down the ridge at a dead run.

Reaching the level of the water hole, Hatfield followed the El Paso road to the wool-laden freight wagon. Only the fact that Prescott had left the brakes locked had prevented the team from stampeding.

IT TOOK all the Ranger's willpower not to go racing in pursuit of the fugitive Raoul Lepperd. Goldy would be more than a match for the freighter's trail-weary copper-bottom. But there was Del Prescott. Hatfield's first concern now was for Del—and he first owed an apology to that young wagoneer.

He swung Goldy to a bucking halt alongside Prescott and leaped from stirrups. Prescott was sitting up now, shaking his head groggily, his sixgun still in his hand.

Desperation was in Del's eyes as he tried to lift his gun, only to have the Ranger stoop and wrench it from his grasp.

"Take it easy, son," he advised. "I wasn't the hombre who slung lead at you from the water hole yonder. Let me have a look at that gunshot wound."

Prescott slumped back, in too much agony to comprehend fully what the Ranger had told him. He saw Hatfield step over to Goldy and unsling his canteen from the saddlehorn, returning to pour the tepid water over Prescott's head.

Hatfield was unbuttoning Prescott's bloody shirt and pulling it back to inspect the crimson-bubbling bullet-hole in the upper arm when Prescott finally gasped:

"If it wasn't you who shot me, who was it? Where'd you turn up from?"

The Ranger said quietly, "It was your old boss, Del. Raoul Lepperd. He was waiting here to ambush you. You're lucky I trailed you out from Madero this morning, otherwise you'd be buzzard bait this instant."

That information was so astonishing it seemed to stun Prescott more than the Ranger's efforts to staunch the bleeding. He was busy with a cotton pad he brought from an Army first-aid kit he always carried in his cantle pouch.

"You're lying, Hatfield," Prescott choked out, wincing as the Ranger poured antiseptic solution on his wound. "I didn't see who was shooting at me, but it couldn't have been Lepperd! Raoul wouldn't have any reason to drygulch me."

Hatfield went on with his first-aid work, relieved that Lepperd's bullet had not broken any bones. Nor had Prescott lost enough blood to endanger a man of his physical fitness.

"Reckon you'll have to take my word for it that it was Lepperd." Hatfield grinned bleakly, his hands expertly fashioning a sterile gauze compress. "You don't savvy why he tried to bushwhack you, Del?"

It was a statement of fact, rather than a question. A lot of puzzles were clearing up in the Lone Wolf's mind now.

"Of course not. I've always been on friendly terms with Raoul."

Hatfield grinned. It so happens," he said, "you're transporting twenty-five-hundred dollars' worth of counterfeit specie for the Gold Eagle smuggling gang, Del. An hour ago, I had every reason to believe I'd be arresting you. Now it's

clear that Lepperd's my man."

"You're accusing *me* of hauling contraband?" Prescott said angrily. "Or what's just as loco, you think Lepperd's a Border-hopper?"

When the bandage was finished to Hatfield's satisfaction, he helped Prescott to his feet. Then, leading the befuddled young man around to the front wheel of the wagon, Hatfield said:

"This spoke here has a hollow interior, Del. Stacked up inside it like so many poker chips are two hundred and fifty bogus ten-dollar double eagles. That's what Lepperd was after—or rather he was after that wheel, to destroy it before it could be used as evidence. It came off his wagon in the first place. The switch was made at Cavalry Springs. I'd say—"

"Listen!" Prescott said explosively. "I was just looking over that wheel awhile ago, wondering what those stains on the spokes are" — Hatfield thought it just as well not to tell him right now and have to go into explanations, that the stains were Musto's life blood — "and I was thinking maybe when I got back home I'd take off that wheel and kind of look it over — "

"I've already done that," Hatfield interrupted. "That's how I know what's in that spoke. I *thought* Lepperd was the king pin smuggler, but I had no real proof, and with his great reputation for honesty and integrity"—he spread his hands—"well, you see how it was. But now that I've seen him in action, know how far he will go to prevent *anybody* knowing how that counterfeit money was being transported, for me, it's cut and dried. All I need to do now is to catch up with him, to make an arrest."

"For me"—Prescott's jaw dropped—"I - I still can't hardly believe it. But I reckon that's foolish, after taking Raoul's slug just now. But how in hell did he work it—hiding his swag in a wheel of mine?"

HATFIELD shugged. "I told you, but I reckon you were still too dazed to understand. Del, this wheel wasn't on your wagon when you pulled out of Mexico night before last. It crossed the Border as part of Bill Vass' Conestoga. And, as I told you also, the switch was made to your wagon at Cavalry Springs. Without your knowledge, I can see now. And I can't tell you how glad I am to see you in the clear, Del. For Mary's sake as well as your own."

Del Prescott seemed more confused than ever. Staring at the wagon spoke, he listened while the Ranger told his amazing story from the beginning — how Jeb Musto had escaped custody in Madero a few minutes after Del Prescott's wagons had left town, how Hatfield had visited Levi Shapiro's gunshop in El Paso to try to solve the riddle of a seven-shot Colt .38, and had found that such a gun had been made to order, but not the name of the owner, and how Hatfield's trail after Musto and perhaps some friend of his who had worked for the freight line and owned the seven-shot had led him to Rio Vista and a job on Raoul Lepperd's payroll.

"Here's how I figure the thing," Hatfield explained. "I don't mind admitting that I had a good idea you were the man who got Musto away from me that night in Madero, Del. For one thing, you were the only one, aside from Mary and me, who knew he was coming out of jail that night. Or at least I thought you were. Fact is, I didn't get my proof of your innocence until this morning, when I trailed your wagon out of Madero and saw Raoul Lepperd try to bushwack you.

"Now here's the way I think the Gold Eagle bunch works. Lepperd's wagons run deep into Mexico, as far as Hermosillo. Somewhere down in Chihuahua, the counterfeit gold coins are put into this hollow wagon wheel spoke — or maybe they've got a lot more of 'em. Nobody thinks of looking in wheel spokes when the wagons are inspected at the Port of Entry to Rio Vista. Up to the time Jeb Musto was caught and jailed, I don't doubt but what the wheel went on to Madero, where Jeb was waiting to unload the gold, and — "

Del Prescott interrupted, bewildered, "Then why did they switch the wheel to my wagon this last trip? To blame me in case the gold was discovered?"

Hatfield shook his head. "No. My guess is that Lepperd maybe knew who I was the minute I showed up, and figured I'd got onto him somehow, or I wouldn't have wanted to hire on with him, and likely he thought he would hire me to see what I was up to. Then he got to thinking there was a possibility I'd go over his outfit with a magnifying glass, if necessary, and might just stumble onto the phony spoke. So he had the wheel switched to one of you wagons, figuring he'd get an opportunity to switch it back when you go to Madero, since I'd be watching his wagons and not yours. But then you took off for El Paso with that particular wagon."

"But why try to ambush me?" Prescott asked. "Why not wait and try to switch the wheel in El Paso the same as he would have done in Madero? He could have sent some of his wagons along."

"I don't know," Hatfield said, "unless he figured he had to get rid of you in order to get hold of that wheel and the phony gold, so he could get rid of them — and you wouldn't be around to talk."

Del Prescott squinted off at the shimmering landscape.

"What became of Lepperd? Did you tag him?"

"He skinned out, as soon as I started shooting from the ridge up yonder, Del. But we haven't seen the last of Sénor Lepperd. Between here and El Paso he may make another try at you and his precious wheel — maybe with a few gunmen to side him."

Prescott stared at Hatfield curiously. "We'll turn back to Madero, then?" he said. "It'll lose me a valuable contract with a shipping outfit in 'Paso if I don't deliver this load of wool on schedule."

Hatfield said, "And you might lose your life if you do. But you want to see Lepperd put out of the smuggling business, don't you?"

Prescott grinned. "Of course."

"Feel up to driving this wagon to El Paso today?"

Prescott fingered his bandaged shoulder gingerly. Finally he said, "Can do. If we turn back to Madero, Mary would get the reason for it out of me sure as guns, and she'd figure it was her duty as sheriff to go gunning for Lepperd. We'll keep rolling toward El Paso. Sure, Lepperd'll try again. Let him."

Hatfield gave the young driver a boost up into the high seat of the Pittsburg, saw Prescott unwrap his lines from the Jacob staff and release his brake lever.

HATFIELD called up to him, "We'll work it this way. I'll ride flanker, cavalry style, about a mile from the road. It's level, open country between here and El Paso — not much chance for Lepperd to fort up within rifle range of the road. If he shows up, I'm sure to spot him. You won't have to worry about being picked off from ambush."

Prescott nodded. "Let's go," he said. "If you see the wagon stop for no good reason, it's because I feel the heat making me pass out."

Back astride his sorrel, Hatfield put Goldy off the El Paso road, following the tracks of Raoul Lepperd's boots toward the nearby barranca. In the remote distance he could see a moving feather of dust, northwest. That would be Raoul Lepperd.

For the remainder of the day, Del Prescott kept his wagon moving steadily. With the coming of nightfall the risk of an ambush increased. Jim Hatfield fell back to join Prescott.

At last the lights of El Paso were sparkling up ahead. Off to the south a Southern Pacific freight train was rumbling through the night, its locomotive headlight resembling an earth-bound comet.

It was close to eleven o'clock when Del Prescott turned his freight wagon into the yard flanking the sheet iron warehouse which was his El Paso terminal. Hatfield was out of stirrups and waiting to give the freighter a hand down.

"First off," the Ranger said, "you've got to get to a doctor, fellow. That shoulder must be giving you hell."

Prescott's chalk-white features told Hatfield that throughout the grueling hours of this wagon journey, the young freight boss had been going on sheer nerve. Hunger and pain and loss of blood had Prescott close to collapse right now.

"I know of a sawbones less than a block down the street," Prescott wheezed, mopping cold perspiration from his brow with his dusty bandanna neckpiece. "You — will stick close — and guard this wagon?"

Hatfield nodded grimly. "You can bet your last blue chip on that. Lepperd beat us to El Paso, that's plain enough. He'll make a play for that wagon wheel sometime during the night. And I'll be ready for him."

Prescott said dubiously; "I have a hunch he won't, Hatfield. He'll know that once we get to El Paso, we can throw a guard around this wagon."

Hatfield said, "No. You're forgetting Lepperd's stubbornness and determination. And my hunch is stronger than yours. He'll show up."

Prescott nodded. "'*Sta bueno,* then. I'll rustle my hocks over to the doctor's and have this gunshot wound looked over. I —I reckon I own you my life, Jim Hatfield. And I don't believe I've even thanked you for — "

But Hatfield was already walking away, leading Goldy toward the barn. When he got back to the wagon to unhitch the team — Prescott's hostler was off duty at this hour — Prescott was gone.

It took half an hour to unharness the horses and get them fed, watered and bedded down in their stalls. Then, coming back to the wagon, Hatfield decided his best bet would be to climb aboard and hide under the rim of the wagon box. He might be in for a long vigil, waiting for Lepperd to show up at this wagon yard. He wished he had thought to tell Prescott to go to a hotel instead of coming back to the wagon.

Hatfield was rolling a cigarette, standing with one cowboot hooked over the Pittsburg's tongue, when he heard footsteps approaching from the gates. His first thought was that Prescott was coming back from the doctor's.

But, as a matter of precaution, drawing back into the shadow of the wagon, he watched the tall figure come closer. From the man's furtive manner, the way he stopped now and again to look over the apparently deserted yard, the Ranger knew this was not Prescott. Nor was it Raoul Lepperd. This man was too slim to be Lepperd.

Slipping a Colt from leather, Hatfield watched the mysterious prowler come alongside the wagon. Immediately the fellow got busy unbuckling the straps which held the wagon jack against the box.

X

EARING his Colt hammer to full cock, Hatfield stepped into the moonlight. The prowler dropped the heavy jack and spun around. As he lifted his head, the Ranger got a full view of his face.

It was Bill Vass, the Lepperd wagon train ramroad whom Hatfield had believed to be on his way to New Mexico tonight.

"Hoist 'em high, Bill," Hatfield said quietly. "This is once you missed connections. You aren't going to empty that wagon spoke this trip."

His momentary panic gone, Bill Vass grinned confidently.

"I reckon I am, Hatfield," he drawled. "You don't think the boss would send me *here* to collect unless he had an ace in the hole, do you?"

Hatfield stepped in close, reaching out to lift Vass' .45 from leather. Before tossing it under the wagon he had a quick look at the gun's cylinder, curious as to whether it would turn out to be Levi Shapiro's seven-shot special. It was not.

"Now," Hatfield said briskly, "you've got a decision to make, Vass. Either a slug in the guts, or taking me to wherever Raoul Lepperd is holed up in El Paso tonight."

Vass grinned again, and shook his head.

"The boss ain't in town, Hatfield. Last night, before he left Madero, he had a pow-wow with me. He'd found out that Prescott was driving to El Paso, and — well, that kind of put a spoke" — he grinned at a private joke — "into something the boss was aiming to do, so when Prescott drove off, Raoul lit out after him, aiming to catch him on the road, and — well, *I* don't know all of Raoul Lepperd's business. All I know is he told me to be on hand here when and if that wagon showed up. Kind of looks like they didn't tangle on the road, huh? Prescott's here, and the boss ain't. What I'm supposed to do now — " He lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

"I can tell you," Hatfield said grimly. Eying the wagon boss he decided Vass was telling the truth. "You and I are taking a *pasear* over to Ranger quarters. I'm arresting you as a member of the Gold Eagle smuggling bunch, Vass."

Vass laughed softly, "So you *have* been doing a little blacksmithing. You *do* know about that wagon wheel." He added easily, "And so I belong to a smuggling ring, huh? Why, sure I do. But you ain't jailing me, Hatfield. Know why?"

A premonition of disaster struck the Lone Wolf. Vass was speaking with the assurance of a man who held all the aces in the deck.

"Just what do you mean, Vass?" he barked.

Lepperd's wagon boss reached in the pocket of his hickory shirt and drew out a metallic object which glittered brightly in the moonlight. He held it out to Hatfield —a ball-pointed silver star with the words,

"SHERIFF, CATLAW COUNTY, TEXAS"

engraved on it.

"Mary Miles' badge!" Hatfield exploded.

Bill Vass dropped the silver star into the dust at the Ranger's feet. "Lepperd grabbed her just before daylight. As an ace in the hole, *he* said, in case he had bad luck trying to stop Prescott on the road. And to give me something to bargain with in case I walked into a law trap here tonight. What else he had in mind—well, how should I know?"

Hatfield's heart was slugging his ribs.

"Where is she, Vass?" he snapped.

"With Raoul. Where you can't lay hands on her. You and Prescott won't see that girl sheriff alive again, Hatfield, if you don't come to terms with us pronto."

Hatfield felt his muscles grow limp. He thrust his sixgun back into leather and said hoarsely, "All right. What's the deal?"

Vass pointed to the smuggler's wagon wheel. "I'm to pick up that wheel and whatever's in it and all, and take charge of the wheel so you or no other lawman can ever use it as evidence against Lepperd. Raoul was meaning to get it out on the road hisself, but I reckon something must of happened."

"Something did," Hatfield said tightly, and growled, "So if I agree to this deal of yours and your damn' crooked boss?"

Vass shrugged. "Why, Lepperd'll let the girl so. He'll put her on horseback and send her to El Paso, safe and sound. With her promise not to bring charges against him — if she wants to stay alive."

Hatfield stepped back from the wagon, gesturing toward the jack Bill Vass had been setting under the axle.

"Go ahead," he said. "I can't risk Mary's life just to break up a smuggling ring. I reckon you win, Vass . . . "

EL PASO clocks were striking midnight when Bill Vass rode out of the Texas settlement, following a little-used trail down the north bank of the Rio Grande.

Trailing Vass' horse was a pack mule, laden with a strange cargo — a Conestoga wagon wheel, minus one of its spokes. Packed in a canvas sack inside his cantlebags were the two hundred and fifty counterfeit gold coins Vass had removed from that spoke in Prescott's wagon yard, with a Texas Ranger looking on helplessly.

The recovery of the smuggled shipment was not important, but with the fake gold coins and the wheel that had held them again in Lepperd's possession, the freight

line owner had shifted the burden of proof to the law. Without the contraband or the ingenious wagon wheel device as proof, the Texas Rangers could not obtain a conviction. Not even with Jim Hatfield's eye-witness story of how the ultra respectable Mr. Raoul Lepperd had tried to drygulch a competitor out on the flats.

Hatfield couldn't *prove* that the big freighter's purpose had been to get hold of that wheel. It could have been trouble between the two freight line owners. Lepperd could even flatly deny all the Ranger said. And Del Prescott hadn't seen Lepperd.

Two miles out of El Paso, Bill Vass reined off the trail and rode through the tules to reach the river bottom. At this drought season of the year, the Rio Grande was reduced to a small stream, coursing down it's central channel.

Reaching the water, Vass plunged his horse out into the muddy depths. At mid-river he reined up, pulled his trail rope to bring the pack mule alongside, and with a bowie knife slashed the rawhide thongs which held the incriminating wagon wheel on the pack saddle.

The heavy wheel slid off into the muddy water and vanished with a foamy splash. A few hours on the quicksand bottom there, and that wheel would be lost forever. Even if the river went bone-dry, as it had been known to do.

Minutes later Vass was gigging his saddler up through the scrub willow and salt-cedar growth on the Chihuahua bank. Once clear of the brush, the freight wagon boss picked up a dim game trail and followed it for another mile before turning off into a shadow-clotted canyon mouth.

There he gave his horse its head, trailing the pack mule. The moon's rays did not penetrate this cliff-walled defile. The strike of steel-shod hooves ringing on the gravel sent echoes running upcanyon.

A hundred yards from the Rio Grande bottoms, the canyon made a sharp angle to the west, and Vass came in sight of a small lake where the waters of a distant spring were impounded by a natural dam. The moon's reflection shimmered on that acre of placid, stagnant water as on an open eye of a corpse. The air was redolent with the compounded odors of rotting mud and dank vegetation.

Circling the west rim of the lake — Laguna Negro, it was called by the Mexican *pastors* who watered their sheep here — Vass put fingers to his lips and whistled a shrill signal. It echoed loudly through the rimming tufa walls.

Dead ahead of Vass was a small rock building with a ramada in front and a mesquite-pole corral behind it. This sheepherders' abandoned camp was the spot Raoul Lepperd had selected as a handy rendezvous close to El Paso. He had told Vass, before the two parted company in Madero, that this was where he would be, holding Sheriff Mary Miles prisoner.

In response to Vass' whistle, Raoul Lepperd appeared in the shack doorway, a sixgun glittering in his hand.

"Things go right in 'Paso, Vass?" the smuggler chief called as his ramrod dismounted.

The wagon boss nodded. "Lucky I had Mary's tin star, though. Jim Hatfield was riding herd on that wagon, there in Prescott's warehouse yard."

Lepperd holstered his gun and emitted a low whistle, feigning surprise. In spite of the fact that he *knew*, after having seen Hatfield with the wheel the night before, that the Ranger would be watching it. That had been proved when Hatfield had so conveniently come to Del Prescott's rescue.

So Lepperd, telling Vass none of this — any more than he had told of his real reason for kidnapping Mary—had sent Vass to El Paso after the wheel. Lepperd had been of no mind himself to tangle with the big Ranger again. Now all Vass knew, or thought he knew, was that the freight line owner and head of the smuggling ring was holding Mary Miles merely as a bargaining factor.

LEPPERD said, "So it *was* the Ranger who fired at me at the water hole

this morning. I had a hunch it was." He eyed Vass sharply. "You're certain Hatfield didn't spot you leaving El Paso tonight, see what direction you took?"

Vass grinned. "I left him tied to the hind wheel of that wagon, with a gag stuffed in his mouth."

"You fool!" Lepperd snarled. "You mean you didn't finish him when you had the chance? Are you too thick-headed to see that with all he knows our only chance to put ourselves in the clear is to gun him down?"

"Sure," Vass said, "but I ain't no killer. Counterfeiting was bad enough. When I was face to face with him, for a minute or two I thought I might get up the nerve to salivate him, if that was the only way I could keep my own rep clean. But when the showdown came, I couldn't. I decided here's where Bill Vass draws the line. As soon as you divvy up my share of the whole deal, I'll be on my way to California."

Lepperd made no comment. He just glared at Vass for a moment, then his eyes narrowed. He growled, "How about Prescott?"

"I seen him lighting a shuck down Cinco Del Mayo Street towards his hotel. He won't find that Ranger till morning."

Vass saw his boss eying the pack mule. "You got rid of the wagon wheel?" Lepperd asked.

"Dumped it plumb in the middle of the river, Boss. Brought the mule along for the Miles girl to ride back on."

Lepperd still offered no comment as the two headed into the sheepherders' shack. A candle flickered feebly from the neck of a beer bottle on a deal table in the middle of the single-roomed cabin. By its shuttering glare, Bill Vass saw Mary Martha Miles sitting on a bunk in one corner, arms trussed behind her back with rawhide.

She appeared to be unharmed. The horse she had ridden from Madero was her own, which Lepperd had brought out from her stable a few minutes after her abduction. It had been tied with her out of sight in the palo verdes by the water hole when Lepperd had set up his ambush for Prescott. She had not known what the shooting was about, since her abductor had remained silent about it. But his black mood afterward told her it had gone unfavorably for him.

As the two men entered the shack now, Mary straightened from her slump.

"All right," she said heavily. "Jim and Del must have lived up to their side of the bargain. How about turning me loose?"

Raoul Lepperd's eyes took on a sinister glint.

"Turn you loose, darling? Turn the Sheriff of Catclaw County loose, with you knowing I'm the ringleader of the Gold Eagle gang? Give you a chance to run straight to your Ranger pard and tell him all you know about me? I thought for a while that *he* might have told *you* I was the smuggler chief — but even though you kept your pretty mouth shut about that, I'm not dumb. He never told you a thing! He didn't have time after he found out himself. And now you want loose! What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

Mary came unsteadily to her feet. On her face was a deathly pallor, but when she spoke it was with calm resignation.

"I knew you'd doublecross Jim Hatfield," she said dully. "I imagine he expected you to — but he had to run that chance."

Lepperd walked over to look down at the girl.

"Believe me, Mary," he said bleakly, "I never thought I'd come to fighting a woman. Specially one as plumb beautiful as you. But that was the risk you took, wearing your father's law badge. You made your big bad mistake by arresting Jeb Musto. I had a notion right then that would turn the spotlight on me. As it is — well, come on."

He reached for her.

Vass turned to follow them out of the cabin doorway into the moonlight, but there was a harsh set to Vass' mouth now. And his eyes were burning as he watched his boss lead Mary over to the high ledge which overlooked the sinister

waters of Laguna Negro.

In Vass' mind was a sense of outrage at Lepperd's perfidy, yet he knew he did not have the nerve to buck the man. Mary did know too much. And her kidnapping alone would be enough to hang Raoul Lepperd.

REACHING the rim of the lake bank, Mary said in a quiet voice to the big man at her side, "You know a woman's curiosity, Raoul—how it can nag at her. It wouldn't hurt for you to tell me now how you've managed to operate for so long, and hang onto your spotless reputation at the same time."

He was fingering the cedar stock of his Colt. Clearly, he had no taste for the task that faced him. Perhaps welcomed delay.

"Why," he said, "I don't mind telling you that, Mary. We smuggled our gold into Texas by wagon wheel — inside a hollow spoke. Jeb Musto picked up the counterfeit gold at Madero and held it for our agents who peddled it all over. It worked for ten years — until your father, and then you, got wise to Musto, even though you still didn't know how or where he got the fake coins."

"Then where did Del Prescott come into the picture? Why were you trailing him this morning?" She drew a sudden sharp breath. "That shooting I heard! Did you drygulch Del?"

Lepperd smiled thinly. "He ain't dead — yet, Mary. But it's a long story. Got to go back to Musto again. When he sent me word that the new blacksmith I had hired was Ranger Hatfield — I'd a notion the minute I clapped eyes on that big hombre that something wasn't on the up and up, but thought I'd give him a chance to run his head into a noose — and then when Musto failed to get Hatfield that night in Rio Vista, I knew right then that that Lone Wolf was onto us, and might order another search of the wagons when we hit Madero.

"Suspicioning us as he did, there was a good chance he'd go over the wagons with a fine tooth comb, which the Customs inspectors never did, because of our clean record. I figured he might find that loaded wheel spoke, so I got Bill Vass to switch it to one of Del's wagons at Cavalry Springs.

"Then in Madero I saw Hatfield bringing that wheel out of the blacksmith shop, and I knew it was all up, if something wasn't done pronto. The only ones he could have told about the business were you and Del. So I figured my only chance of wiping the slate clean was to knock off all three of you. And now, because Bill Vass here is chicken-hearted, I've got to get back into town and finish off your pards myself. That might be easy, though. Hatfield's tied up, and Del's pretty bad wounded."

Boastful as all men of his caliber were, as Raoul Lepperd got wound up, telling what a great, smart man he was, he had almost reached the point of forgetting just why he was here, and telling all this. It was a sudden whicker from Bill Vass' saddle horse, in front of the cabin, that brought him sharply back to earth. And gave both him and Vass their first inkling of danger.

Both men whirled as a sharp voice lashed at them from the shadows alongside the mesquite corral:

"You're covered, the two of you! — Mary, drop flat!"

Jim Hatfield's voice! Incredibly the Lone Wolf was *here*, at this Laguna Negro rendezvous!

With a choked oath, Lepperd flung himself violently against Mary before she could drop to the ground. The cliff echoed her panicked scream as she was knocked over the rimrock edge, unable to fling out her rawhide-trussed arms as she hurtled the fifteen feet to the murky waters below.

Two men leaped into the open moonlight — Jim Hatfield and Del Prescott. Guns poised, they closed in on the bayed Raoul Lepperd. Bill Vass was backing away, his arms lifted in surrender.

Guns crashed in ear-riving thunder as Lepperd returned the Ranger's fire. The boss smuggler took the shock of slamming

lead, and the sixgun dropped from his fist as he crumpled on the rimrock.

Hatfield was veering over, his guns covering Vass, as Prescott raced to the sheer drop-off of the ledge and hurtled out into empty space in a running dive.

Hatfield was skidding to a halt alongside Vass when he saw Prescott's head surface in a smother of foam, down there in the vile-smelling depths of Laguna Negro. Lepperd's last-minute effort to doom his girl prisoner to drowning had failed. For even now Prescott was standing in armpit-deep water, holding Mary's head and shoulders above water.

THE LONE WOLF whipped a pair of handcuffs from his chaps pocket and snapped them over Vass' wrists. After he had taken the ramrod's revolver he walked over to Lepperd's body and pried the gun from the dead man's hand.

One look at the cylinder, bored for .38-caliber loads, told its own story. Here was the seven-shot pistol Levi Shapiro had made for an unknown customer. It would wind up as a curio in the old gunsmith's collection in El Paso.

"So it was Lepperd," Hatfield said absently, "who got Musto away from me in Madero. With this seven-shot gun."

Vass nodded indifferently. "Having an extra shot in his thirty-eight got Raoul Lepperd out of more'n one tight, Hatfield," he said. "He hid out in Madero as soon as he heard Mary had clapped Musto in jail. But he always admitted he never would of got Musto loose if it hadn't been for that extra load in his gun."

Hatfield thrust the gun into the waistband of his levis.

"What your boss didn't know," the Lone Wolf said, "was that his seventh bullet that night put me on his track, even though I didn't know whose gun it was. Fate works strangely sometimes."

Down below the rim of the ledge, Del and Mary were wading ashore.

Bill Vass said numbly, "How'd you track me here tonight, Hatfield? Maybe I *should* have killed you before I left El Paso."

Hatfield watched Prescott and Mary clambering up the steep side of Laguna Negro.

"Why, Vass," he said, "Del untied me no more'n a couple of minutes after you left me. We never let you get out of our sight till we saw you hit the trail out of El Paso, and in this moonlight tracking you was child's play."

Vass licked his lips. "Hatfield," he said, "maybe you won't believe it, but I've never cottoned to this smuggling deal of Lepperd's. I was an honest man when I hired out to him ten years ago. You figure it would help me draw a lighter sentence if I was to turn over all I know about the Gold Eagle gang to the law? Where the counterfeit money is made, how it's distributed? All that?"

Jim Hatfield's eyes were gentle as he stared at his prisoner.

"I never make bargains with outlaws," he said, "but I think you'll have a chance to go straight, Vass. And I think you would, given the chance. — Right now I've got to talk to this young couple here. I have a hunch tomorrow will see a wedding in El Paso, a wedding I wouldn't want to miss."

But before the morrow came — that night, in fact, when he got back to El Paso — Jim Hatfield had something else to dispel any gloom left. It was a note that had been left for him, was waiting for him when he dropped in at Ranger headquarters. And it read:

> Jim, I have found one ledger with seven shots gun and I have found one name of customer for same. Raoul Lepperd. Maybe I help you, ha, Jim? I have great joy always to help Rangers.
>
> Your friend,
> Levi Shapiro

Crumpling the note into a pocket, the Lone Wolf threw back his head and laughed. *What* that old gunsmith didn't know about Ranger work!

"Bless you, old-timer," he muttered, as he strode toward the door. "But why in thunder*ation* couldn't you have had great joy in finding that ledger before so much lead got to flying?" ● ● ●

Chris glared at him

The Brass Ring

By BEN FRANK

THE day Whitney Whitmore Wheeler spent his last cent for a brass ring began like any other day. But what happened after that—

Well, to look at him—he was a long, limber drink of water, with big shoulders, big red ears and innocent blue eyes—to look at him, you'd never guess he was the kind who would give you the shirt off his bony back. But he was. Or that he'd called the bluff of a rough and tough gent by the name of Greedy Gus Gatts, thereby earning the undying hatred of this unsavory sidewinder.

Ever hear about a guy so good-hearted he lost the prettiest girl in seven counties round?

And on this particular summer day, you'd never guess he was saddling his cayuse for the purpose of riding to visit the girl of his dreams. He just didn't look spruced up enough for a romantic mission of any kind.

The sad truth is, Whitney Whitmore Wheeler's sun-bleached hair looked like it had been combed with a post-hole digger. And a sadder truth is, his size-ten scuffed boots, worn levis and faded blue shirt were about the best clothes he owned. You can't expect a warm-hearted, generous young man, just starting out in the ranching business, to have much in the way of worldly goods.

But he wasn't worried none this morning. Not Whitney Whit—everybody called him Johnny for short. Not with twenty-five dollars cash money in his pocket.

Whistling off-key, he flung the battered saddle over his cayuse's back and started to tighten the cinch strap. But at that moment, a sound caught his attention. Facing about, he beheld Abe Gumb and his boy, Joe, coming toward him driving the meanest-looking half-grown longhorn bull you ever hoped to lay eyes on.

"Open the gate, Johnny!" Abe bellowed. He was a long, hungry, middle-aged gent who had homesteaded down on Turtle Creek. "Watch him, Johnny!" he yelled. "He's a mite wild!"

Without stopping to think, Johnny obligingly opened the corral gate and stood aside, while Abe and the fifteen-year-old boy herded the unwilling, wild-eyed brute into the corral.

"Johnny," Abe said hopefully, "we figured you'd give us fifty dollars for him."

"What?" Johnny like to fainted. "Fifty dollars?"

He turned to stare at the sod-pawing critter. No brand, but Johnny figured he belonged to his Bar W herd, anyway. Likely a stray that Abe had cornered.

HE TURNED to glare at the homesteader. "What makes you think I'd pay fifty dollars for him?"

Seeing the hope fade from Abe's eyes, he stopped. He knew how it was with Abe. A bunch of kids and another one on the way. No money. No nothing.

Also, Johnny didn't quite forget the girl of his dreams.

"Twenty," he said hoarsely.

"Sold," Abe said instantly.

The next thing Johnny knew, his fortune had been reduced to a single five-dollar bill, and Abe and his boy were hurrying away.

"Oh, well," Johnny muttered, "five dollars is enough for next Saturday night."

Sighing, he swung into the saddle and headed toward the James's Lazy J. But he hadn't gone a mile when he met up with the big fly in his soup—a newcomer, Nels Nichols.

Nels eyed Johnny scornfully. He'd never heard how Johnny had lost his temper once and had kicked the bragging Greedy Gus Gatts clear off the Bar W.

"I suppose you're going to see that James girl," Nels said. "You might as well forget her, Wheeler, for I've decided to cut you out and take her over myself."

Johnny rolled up his big fists. He didn't like this slick-haired fancy-Dan no two ways from heck and back, but he unrolled his fists. After all, Christine was the one to decide between him and Nels.

Without so much as a harsh word, he rode on. But he began to do some worrying. Come to think about it, Chris had acted kind of unromantic lately.

It so happened that Chris saw him approaching when he was a long ways off. But she knew there wasn't anybody in the world but Whitney Whitmore Wheeler who rode like he was ready to fall apart and yet fit on a horse like he was part of the saddle.

Suddenly her heart began to beat too fast. She had known him all her life and had made up her mind long ago to latch onto him when the proper time came. Only—

She shook back her fine, soft hair, which was a pleasing mixture of red and gold, and a slight frown puckered her brow. Lately, it seemed, a few misgivings had crept into her mind. Like Nels Nichols had said—Nels owned the neighboring

Diamond spread and had plenty of folding money—Johnny Wheeler just didn't seem to get ahead. Her frown deepened. She knew what was wrong with Johnny. He was too kind-hearted and generous for his own good.

Although she was smiling when Johnny hit the ground at the edge of the yard, the frown was still in her mind.

"Hi, Chris," he said, feasting his eyes on her. She was something, dressed in a fresh gingham dress that fit her just so-so. And with the sun on her bright hair, and her arms and legs bare and lightly tanned. "Gosh, Chris!" he said in a choked-up voice.

"Johnny," she said, "what brings you here?"

"You and the Saturday night dance in Two-trees. Figured we ought to go." He grinned sheepishly. "But after buying a no-good bull from Abe Gumb, I only got—"

"What's that about buying a bull?" Chris asked.

Johnny told her. "I know Abe has a tough time of it," he added, "so I—"

"Johnny," Chris cut in, "you're a great big chump!"

"What?" Johnny yelled. "I'd like to know why?"

"Johnny," she said sadly, "you're just an easy-going push-over for every worthless—"

"Now, listen," Johnny sputtered.

"You listen to me!" Suddenly Chris was all steamed up about it. "Let's go back two years when you first bought the Bar W and hired that family of immigrants to dig a well when you knew—Johnny, how many times has that well gone dry?"

"But them folks needed some work," Johnny said.

"I'll skip the Gumbs and your giving them some extra land and helping build their cabin. But Mule Miller—has he ever paid you for the feed you let him have last winter?"

"Well, no," Johnny admitted. "But Mule would've likely lost his freighting business if I hadn't let him have the feed he needed."

CHRIS said heatedly, "If he doesn't stay sober, he'll lose it anyway. And there's Indian Jim and your no-account relatives and— No, Johnny, a girl has to think of the future. She can't let someone who can never say no to a hard-luck story monopolize all her time."

"You mean you won't go with me Saturday night?"

"Exactly!" she said, and shut the door in his face.

Dazed, Johnny stumbled back to his sleepy-eyed cayuse, climbed aboard and headed back home.

As for Christine James, she dropped down on the nearest chair and wept.

She hadn't intended to fly off the handle like that. But to see Johnny let every Tom, Dick and Harry in the country take advantage of him—well, like Nels said, a girl didn't want to tie up with a gent who didn't have brains enough to look out for himself. And thinking of Nels, she suddenly realized she was still crazy about Whitney Whitmore Wheeler, even if he was a big chump.

She told herself, I know what I'll do! I'll catch up to him, tell him I'm sorry and ask him to take me to the dance just this one more time.

Smiling now, she ran to the horse barn and discovered that her pa had turned the saddle ponies into the pasture. Grabbing a lariat, she headed out to run down a mount, even if she did know that now she'd never catch Johnny before he reached the Bar W.

In the meantime, Johnny cut into the timber along Turtle Creek, feeling lower than a lost dog. Coming out near the ford, he was surprised to see a whiskery old pilgrim sitting on a stump, looking like a tired scarecrow.

"Howdy, mister," Johnny said.

The oldster raised his weary eyes and studied Johnny in thoughtful silence. "Son," he said at last, "you look like you've just had some big trouble."

Johnny admitted that life was a mite thorny at present.

"Maybe this would change your luck."

A sudden crafty expression in his eyes,

the old tramp pulled a brassy ring from a pocket and let the sun glint on red glass in the setting."

Johnny knew the ring wasn't worth fifty cents and wouldn't change nobody's luck. But he looked at the old gent again, the ragged clothes, the thin, unsteady hands—

"I could use a change in luck," he said, grinning. "Would you sell me that ring for five dollars?"

"Glad to," the tramp said. "And bless you, my boy!"

Johnny just could barely squeeze his little finger into the ring. Riding on, he studied the cheap red stone and shook his head. Maybe Chris was right about him being a push-over, but that poor old wanderer had looked downright hungry and too feeble to work much.

Arriving home, he halted by the corral to gaze at the sod-pawing bull, which was further evidence that Chris knew what she was talking about. But he tried not to think of her.

"Reckon I'll keep you penned up till you kind of calm down," he told the ornery-eyed critter.

It was about then that Chris came riding up, her cheeks a little pink, a smile on her soft, red lips.

"Johnny," she said, dropping to the ground with a swish of skirts, "I'm sorry about flying off the handle."

"It was all my fault," Johnny said, suddenly feeling ashamed of himself. "I reckon I never will amount to shucks if I don't stop being so soft-hearted."

"Hush, Johnny," she said. "I like you just like you are, and if you still want to take me to the dance, all right."

"You bet!" Johnny said happily. "I—" His voice choked off, and his face paled. "Only," he gurgled, "I'm flat busted. You see, I met a poor old man—"

She looked at the brassy ring. She looked at the sod-pawing bull. Then she looked at Johnny, and suddenly her blue eyes began shooting sparks all over the place.

"Whitney Whitmore Wheeler," she yelled, and she never called him that unless she was fried to a crisp, "Whitney Whitmore Wheeler, I wouldn't go with you if you were the last man alive!"

SHE swung into the saddle and rode away like a house on fire. Poor Johnny just stood there, watching the dust settle and wishing he was dead. But presently he came to life, wandered to his two-roomed house and kicked open the door.

That was when he found the note. It read:

> Dear Johnny, I came to remind you your interest is past due. Better drop around at the bank tomorrow.
>
> Tom Adams

Johnny stared at the ring on his little finger. "I wish you was a lucky ring," he mumbled.

That night, he didn't sleep hardly at all. When morning came, he felt like a tired old man, but he hitched a pony to his rattly old buggy and drove to Two-trees, anyway.

The first person he met on the splintery board walk of the dusty little cowtown was the Diamond owner, Nels Nichols.

"Hello, Wheeler," Nels said, eyeing Johnny with distaste. "How's the give-away business going lately?"

Johnny rolled up his fists; then unrolled them.

Laughing sourly, Nels walked away, the silver studs on his wide leather belt gleaming pleasantly in the sun. And following him with his eyes, Johnny saw where he was headed. Straight toward Chris James, who stood framed in the post office doorway, looking prettier than flowers in May.

"I oughta popped him one," Johnny muttered.

Grinding his teeth, he went on to the bank.

Tom Adams sat in his two-by-four office, scowling darkly at some papers scattered on his desk.

"Well, Johnny," he said, "things don't look so good for you and the Bar W."

"I could sign another note," Johnny said hopefully.

"Dang it all," Tom exploded, "you've already signed too many notes! Now I got to get hard-boiled with you."

That was when Sheriff Omaha Olson wandered in, a frown creasing his round, pink face.

"Just got word that Greedy Gus Gatts is on the prowl again," he said. "There ain't nothing that low-down son wouldn't do. Or steal. Reckin you ought to keep a close watch on things, Tom."

The sheriff's gaze shifted to Johnny.

"Son, you and the folks in your neighborhood had better keep your eyes open, too. You was the one who took him on and whammed the tar outa him. And you and Bill James and a few others made it so hot for him he moved out."

"I licked him once, I can lick him again," Johnny said.

The sheriff shook his head. "I reckon you ain't heard he's become a gunslick with a killing to his credit."

Johnny felt a sudden prickle of cold at the back of his neck. "No, I hadn't heard that," he said hoarsely.

Worried now, even a trifle scared, he made his departure. He could take care of himself in a fist fight, but a gun fight was something else. Scowling, he crossed to Ike's General Store and clomped in.

Ike Ingalls was a scrawny old codger with a harassed expression in his faded blue eyes. Seeing Johnny, he wondered why he'd ever gone into the grocery business.

"Need a few things, Ike," Johnny said hopefully.

Looking unhappy, Ike leafed through a thick ledger until he found Johnny's account. He shuddered slightly.

"I figure this is the last time I can fix you up, Johnny, till I see some money."

Sighing, he closed the ledger. He knew he was a durned fool for letting Johnny get in any deeper, but he kind of liked the young, soft-hearted homesteader.

His arms loaded, Johnny staggered out of the store. He was tucking the last sack of grub into the buggy when he had the uneasy feeling that someone was staring at him. Turning, he found himself looking at the weathered, coppery face of Indian Jim Deerhorn.

"How, friend Johnny," Jim said, his dark eyes now fixed hungrily on a sack of flour.

GLANCING about, Johnny observed Blue-feather, Indian Jim's squaw, standing nearby, a longing expression on her sad face.

"I really don't need that sack of flour," Johnny said. "If you folks want it—"

A smile breaking across her face, Blue-feather stepped up, shouldered the fifty-pound sack of flour and hurried away, with Indian Jim tagging along behind her.

"Whitney Whitmore Wheeler!"

Turning, Johnny saw Chris standing on the board walk, glaring at him.

"How much longer are you going to keep on feeding that worthless Indian and his squaw?"

"Now, Chris," Johnny said soothingly, "Indian Jim's a pretty good old boy."

"Oh, damn!" she said, turning away. "What's the use!"

It took a lot of aggravating to make Christine use any kind of swear word. Feeling depressed, Johnny climbed into his buggy and headed homeward.

Coming to a fork in the trail, he decided he ought to take a look at the meadow he was saving to cut for hay. A few minutes later, he came to a stretch of rich bottom land in the bend of Turtle Creek. The hay was ready to cut and would make all the winter feed he'd need. If he could only stall off the bank until spring—

Sighing, he turned around and drove homeward.

Coming in sight of the Bar W, he saw that life had taken another turn for the worse. Only one gent would own a flea-bitten pack-mule like that. His Uncle Whirlwind Wheeler, as trifling an old gent as ever ate anybody out of house and home.

The oldster was sitting on the front porch, lanky, gimlet-eyed, with more whiskers than a carload of tomcats, and a shiny bald head.

"Nephew, you're a sight for sore eyes! Like I was a-telling Jupiter, my mule, that nephew of mine is a fine boy."

"Hello, Uncle Whirlwind," Johnny said. "How are you?"

"Fair. Just fair." Uncle Whirlwind sighed dismally. "Figured I'd spend the winter with you. Always did want to look around them rocky hills for gold, anyway."

Johnny knew there was no more gold on the Bar W than he had in his empty pockets. But he didn't say anything.

"Wish I could help you with your ranch work, Johnny," Uncle Whirlwind went on mournfully. "But my rheumatix is worse lately.—How soon you aiming to have supper ready?"

"Won't be long," Johnny promised. "If you'll pump some fresh water, I'll get grub started."

"Tried to a minute ago, but your danged well's dry."

Alarmed, Johnny ran to the well and gave the pump a try. Nothing happened but a few lusty gurgles. Cussing to himself, he loaded a milk can into the buggy and headed for the Turtle Creek school where there was a good well. Stock water would have to be hauled from the creek. And with that hay ready to cut—

"Damn it, anyway!" he fumed.

When he returned home, he found Uncle Whirlwind still resting on the porch, waiting patiently for his supper.

Johnny stumbled on into the house. With water to haul, hay to make, Uncle Whirlwind to look after, ranch work to do, and the girl of his dreams aggravated with him, not to mention the interest due at the bank and danger from Greedy Gus Gatts, Johnny was so upset he couldn't think what to do first.

However, by the time morning came, he had mapped out a course of action. After he'd fed himself and Uncle Whirlwind and had given the oldster a supply of food and a pick for digging for gold, he saddled his cayuse and headed for the Gumb's homestead. But he hadn't gone far when he met Chris, who had come to make up with him.

"Hello, Johnny," she said, smiling contritely. "Guess I kind of blew up yesterday there in town. I'm sorry." She went on hurriedly, "Nels asked me to go to the dance with him tonight, but I'd much rather go with you. Since you've taken me so many times, it's my turn to take you and do the paying."

JOHNNY said morosely, "Dog-gone it, Chris! As-much as I'd like to go, I just won't have time. You see, Uncle Whirlwind has come to spend another winter with me, and—"

"You mean," she gasped, "you're going to let him sponge off you again, Johnny?"

"He's got to stay some place during the winter," Johnny said defensively. "Anyway, he's prospecting for gold on the Bar W, and if he should find some, he'd split with me."

"Johnny—Johnny!" she said, shaking her head. "Won't you ever learn?"

"Also," Johnny said wanting to change the subject, "my well's gone dry again and the hay's ready to cut."

"Good heavens! How're you going to get everything done by yourself?"

"Figured I'd ask the Gumbs to help. After all, I've done quite a lot to help them, you know."

"This ought to be worth seeing," Chris said, her blue eyes suddenly narrowing. "I'll go with you."

He didn't much like having her tagging along, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

Abe Gumb was sitting in the shade of his log cabin. Seeing his visitors riding into the weedy clearing, he pulled his bony face into a deep scowl. Hearing the sound of horses, Joe came out of the cabin, followed by a stair-step string of ragged brothers and sisters. They lined up and stared pop-eyed at Johnny and Chris. The kids looked like they hadn't had enough to eat for a couple months.

"Been aiming to come to see you, Johnny," Abe said, his scowl deepening. "One of your blasted Bar W steers got into my garden and like to ruined it."

Johnny turned startled eyes toward the

weed-choked garden. Likely wasn't a dime's worth of vegetables in the whole patch.

"I figure you owe me damages," Abe said belligerently.

Well, Johnny didn't know what to say. Then he looked at the line of thin, hungry kids and could think of only one answer.

"All right, Abe," he said. "Go ahead and butcher that beef for the damage he did to your garden. What I came to see you about was to ask you if you'd help with my haying."

"I'm right busy and won't have time," Abe said, hastily backing away. "Sorry, wished I did have time, but—" He turned abruptly and disappeared into the cabin.

Johnny and Chris rode back to the trail. Suddenly Chris threw back her reddish-golden head and laughed an unfunny little laugh.

"Now, Johnny," she asked, "what have you got to say?"

He didn't have anything to say. He knew he was a soft-hearted idiot for letting Abe have that beef, but when you looked at all them thin, hollow-eyed kids, what else could you do?

They rode on up over a low hill and saw Mule Miller driving one of his battered old freight wagons. The wagon was empty, except for a gallon jug that stood between Mule's worn-out boots. One look at Mule's red nose was enough to tell them what had been in the jug.

Seeing Chris and Johnny, the old man pulled his team to a willing halt. "Fine day, folks," he said with a slight hiccup.

"Mule," Johnny said, "my well's gone dry, and I've got to start hauling water. I reckon you could pay me that way for the feed I let you have last winter. Fill that wagon with barrels and haul 'em from the creek."

The sad expression on Mule's seamy face stopped him.

"Sure wished I did have time to haul water for you, Johnny," he said. "But I'm on my way to Two-trees. Figure Ike Ingalls might give me a job. So long, folks. Giddap, you lazy, no-good varmints!"

He went rattling away on down the trail, with the jug bouncing around between his feet.

"Likely he figures if he works for cash, he can pay me some on his feed bill," Johnny said feebly.

This time, Chris didn't laugh. She gave Johnny a long, level look that made him squirm.

"Whitney Whitmore Wheeler," she said, "you make me sick!"

Eyes flashing, she spurred her pony straight across the landscape toward the Lazy J, leaving Johnny sitting there with a lost, frightened sensation in the pit of his stomach.

THIS blue-eyed, bright-haired girl of his dreams wasn't fooling, and Johnny knew it. He knew something else, too. If he didn't want to lose her to Nels Nichols, he'd better change his ways and become a man instead of a mouse, pronto!

Suddenly his bony chin jutted. Right then and there, he resolved to show the world in general and Chris in particular that he wasn't no longer a push-over for nobody. And he reckoned as good a place to start as any was with Uncle Whirlwind Wheeler. Looking like a thunder cloud, he rode home at a dust-fogging clip.

Uncle Whirlwind sat on the front porch in the shade. His prospecting fever had worn off in a hurry. Seeing his nephew, he smiled happily, for he knew dinner would soon be ready. Then observing the scowl on Johnny's face, he felt a trickle of worry and had a notion he'd better not look too cheerful or carefree. He began to groan softly.

"Dad-blamed rheumatix is sure giving me fits today," he said feebly. "Johnny boy, I don't know what would become of your poor old uncle if you'd turn him out in the cold."

Johnny took one look at his poor old uncle and knew he couldn't no more kick him out than he could fly.

"Don't worry, Uncle Whirlwind," he said. "You can stay here as long as you like."

Then with a little groan of his own, he wandered on to the corral, climbed up on

the top rail and sat down to figure things out. But there simply wasn't no answer to all his problems. Hay to cut. Water to haul. Interest due at the bank. His credit shut off at Ike's store. No wonder Chris had decided he wasn't for her. Smart girl.

That was when he heard a furious snort behind him. But before he could move, the ornery longhorn bull crashed into the fence, the point of one sharp horn ripping a great gash in the worn seat of Johnny's levis.

He yelled, waved his arms, lost his balance and tumbled forward. It wasn't much of a fall. Shouldn't have hurt him a bit. But one leg slipped between two fence rails, and when his weight came down on it, something had to give.

Pulling his leg free, he rolled away from the fence and the snorting bull. A great grinding pain shot through him. Fighting against a wave of blackness, he closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. The next thing he knew, Uncle Whirlwind was bending over him.

"Take it easy, boy," he was saying, "while I sort of bind up that leg and get you fixed comfortable in the house. Then I'll go for help and get a medico. . . ."

Chris didn't hear about the accident until the middle of next week. Right away, she knew she had to help Johnny, for with no one to look after him except old Whirlwind—A shudder ran through her.

"You'd better take over some food," Mrs. James said. "Likely that poor boy don't have a thing fit to eat in the house."

"If there's anything me and the boys can do over there," Bill James said, "we'll drop our work here and go right over."

Now, this coming from her pa and ma, who had not been too hot about Johnny as a possible husband and had seemed pleased when she'd started going around with Nels Nichols, came to Christine as quite a surprise. But she didn't say anything. After loading provisions into the buggy, she headed for the Bar W.

As luck would have it, she ran across Nels at the Turtle Creek ford. He lifted his fancy hat and flashed her his big toothy smile. But seeing the load of grub, his dark eyes narrowed slightly.

"Don't tell me you're headed for the Bar W," he muttered.

He followed her across the creek, and there they saw old Mule Miller. His freight wagon was chuck full of barrels, and he was dipping creek water up into them.

"Figured I'd help Johnny out a little," he said.

"But," Chris sputtered, "when he asked you the other day—"

"He didn't have no busted leg then," Mule said, scowling.

SHE and Nels went on along the trail. Nels did a lot of bragging about himself having enough sense not to break a leg, but Chris only half-heard him. She had the confused feeling of a person who wakes up in the night in a strange room.

They came to the meadow, and she found herself staring at the scene in disbelief. Abe Gumb and all his kids were out there, working their heads off. They'd already built two large haystacks.

"Reckon you've heard about Johnny?" Abe called. "Since he ain't able to put up his hay, figured we'd do it for him. He always treated us mighty good."

Chris swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat and said, "That's nice of you, Abe."

Arriving at the Bar W, she went into the house, expecting the worst. She found everything spick and span.

Johnny was sitting up in an easy chair and looking fine. Didn't look like he'd missed any meals. He even got up and hobbled around the room on a pair of crutches just to show her and Nels he wasn't no helpless cripple.

"Johnny," she said, "I was so worried that—"

"You don't need to worry about me," Johnny said coolly.

He'd made up his mind that Chris deserved to marry a handsome, moneyed man like Nels, so he was being stand-offish on purpose. No sense of letting her feel sorry for him, either.

"Indian Jim, Blue-feather and Uncle Whirlwind are taking care of me fine," he went on in a hard, flat voice. "Ike Ingalls sent me a wagonload of grub from his store. Tom Adams sent word that as long as I was laid up, I don't have to worry about the interest due the bank. So I'm doing fine, thank you, and you might as well go back home."

He sat down, laid his crutches across his knees and closed his eyes. No two ways about it, he just couldn't stand that unhappy and hurt expression on Chris's face.

Looking at Johnny, Chris remembered about casting bread on water. Sure, Johnny had overdone this bread-casting a few times, but—suddenly she felt so unwanted and lonely that she was afraid she would break down and cry.

"Come on, Nels," she said. "Let's go."

That was when Johnny opened his eyes for one last look at her. What he saw coming through the front door like to scared him to death. Greedy Gus Gatts with a long-barreled Colt gripped in a big grimy fist.

Nels and Chris saw him, too. Nels took one look at the gun, turned whiter than a sheet and lifted his hands so fast he almost threw his shoulders out of joint. Christ turned pale, but she stood her ground.

Greedy Gus looked at Johnny's splinted leg and laughed happily. He was a thick-shouldered man, with a flabby body and small mean eyes that would make a rattlesnake crawl back into its hole.

"I figured before I left the country for good, I'd stop by and bust your other leg," he said.

He turned his greedy eyes on Nels.

"I'll take that silver-studded belt and your watch, friend."

He looked at Chris and sucked in a quick breath.

"What do you know! Old Bill James's girl! Looks like this is my chance to even the score with him, too. Reckon I'll take you with me, sister. Likely would slow down that posse. Besides, it'll be a pleasure to have your company."

Once again, he cast a spiteful glance at the helpless Johnny.

"I reckon you ain't got a thing I want," he rasped, "so I might as well work you over and get!"

"I got something you'd like to have," Johnny said holding up a hand and letting the sun catch the red glass set in the ring. "But you can't get it."

"Yeah?" Greedy Gus said, moving forward. "Why?"

"Because it won't come off my finger."

"I'll get it off, or take your finger with it," Gus snarled, grabbing Johnny's outstretched hand.

JOHNNY let out a howl of pain and came half-way up out of his chair. Greedy Gus grinned and twisted at the ring. He was having so much fun, listening to Johnny's howls that he got pretty careless.

"Looks like I'll have to take finger and all," he said, lowering his gun and fumbling for his knife—and Johnny brought up a crutch with his free hand.

It caught Gus under his flabby chin and liked to snapped his head off. Before he could get his eyes focused, Johnny brought the crutch around in a whistling arc and hit him just above his left ear.

Gus's knees sagged. With a faint sigh, he sank to the floor and went sound asleep.

"Johnny!" Chris cried, running to him and easing him back on the chair. "Are you all right?"

Before he could answer, Uncle Whirlwind came charging into the room.

"Johnny," he yelled, "I was a-poking around amongst them rocks west of the barn, looking for gold, and what you reckon I found? Water! A underground spring that—Hey, what's happened here?"

Before Johnny could explain, Sheriff Omaha Olson and his posse came roaring up and stamping into the house.

"Bless my soul!" Olson bleated. "There's our bank robber knocked colder'n a sackful of dead fish!"

"Heap big reward for catchum outlaw," Indian Jim said, poking his grinning face

through the doorway.

"Guess I'll go home," Nels said in a weak voice.

"Good idea," Blue-feather said, waddling in from the kitchen. "Good idea for everybody else, too, except Chris."

Not long after that, Johnny and Chris were alone. But they were afraid to look at each other.

Johnny knew now that Nels Nichols wasn't for Chris James. But he himself couldn't ask Chris to marry him after what had just happened. She might feel obligated to repay him for saving her from Greedy Gus. As for Chris, she was afraid that if she told Johnny he was the only boy for her, he would think she wanted to marry him just because he was a hero with a hatful of reward money.

"Since there's nothing I can do to help you, Johnny, I'll go on home," she said.

"Good-by, Chris," Johnny said with equal casualness.

And that would likely have been the end of it if he hadn't discovered that in the tussle with Greedy Gus, the ring had slipped from his finger.

"Chris," he yelled, "my lucky ring's gone!"

"What do you mean, lucky ring?"

"If it hadn't been for that ring, Greedy Gus—" His voice ended in a quaver.

Suddenly Chris knew it was a lucky ring for sure. "I'll find it," she said, dropping to her hands and knees.

Busted leg or not, Johnny began to crawl about the floor, helping her look for the ring. They both saw it at the same time, made a grab for it, and their hands touched. Startled, they looked into each other's eyes. And that was enough.

"You're right, Chris," he said huskily. "I'm just a great big easy-mark for no-good relatives and everybody else."

"No, Johnny," she whispered. "I wasn't right. Just partly right and partly wrong. The same as you were partly right, yet partly wrong. Some place there's a middle ground between helping others and looking after your own interests."

Suddenly Whitney Whitmore Wheeler's grin was a mile wide, for he was knowing that from now on, he and Chris could work things out together. So just for fun, he tried the brass ring on the third finger of her left hand for size.

If the truth must be told, he never got it back. Not even after they were married.

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Ride for Tucson

By

W. J. REYNOLDS

Apaches were on their trail, all around them, and they had but one slim hope

IKE BURNEY gripped the Navy Colt in his sweaty hand. He could hear the whisper of the Apache's snub-nosed moccasins not ten feet away, above him on the rim of the cutbank. Ike pushed his back flat against the bank and hoped that the slight overhang of brush would be enough concealment. He held the sixgun tilted beside his head, and his left hand pressed the long bladed knife flat against his belly. Sand trickled into the wash then the copper colored body, rancid with grease and sweat, shot past Ike to land on the floor of the wash.

Ike used the bank to give him leverage as he shot forward, the six-shooter swinging savagely, the knife flashing in a belly stroke. The Apache's squall died in his throat as the heavy barrel of the sixshooter smashed him downward, then the knife slid deeply into the belly, ripping.

Swiftly then, Ike shucked his cowhide boots and donned the moccasins from the Indian's feet. He dragged the dead warrior to a drift in the middle of the wash and concealed it beneath the snagged debris. Then he hastily kicked sand over the bloodstains. It wouldn't fool an Apache but they could easily pass it unless they were looking.

HE CAME out of the draw cautiously, eyes scanning the terrain, probing the mesquite and cacti and brush. Behind him was the dry bed of the Santa Cruz, ahead was the semi-desert, the cactus, rock and mesquite with the nutrient grass that had caused more than one stockman to lose his hair to Cochise's Apaches.

He ran lightly now in the moccasins, a lean sunburned figure who somehow blended into this sun-dried landscape, causing no more notice than Apache. The sun was up full now and the Neal ranch was still five miles away.

He had covered a mile when the ghost of movement ahead along a slight ridge sent him flat in a clump of brush. He inched upward to look. The movement had become a column of smoke that thickened quickly and darkened. A curse burst from Ike Burney's lips like a sob. The Neal home.

Jarred and Bess Neal. And Cathy. Too late. Too late to help the Neals. Ike lay there and beat his clenched fist against the ground and cursed through his teeth. "The murdering devils! The dirty, murdering devils!"

He came to his feet and ran. He moved fast now, disregarding the possibility of being seen. But a half mile of running in the thin air had him gasping like a fish, his breath sobbing hoarsely in his dry throat. He slowed to a walk that seemed pitifully slow.

"Cathy," he said. "Cathy."

Ike had left Tubac last night, hoping by some chance to reach the Neal place in time to convince Jarred that he'd best get his family out with all speed. The valley of the Soniata had gone mad. Cochise was determined to chase the hated White Eyes beyond his desert. He was having a field day, since the army had pulled out to fight the South. There were even rumors that the garrison was leaving Tucson.

Arizona lay at the mercy of the Apache, and mercy was not a word or philosophy known to him. But for a few stubborn or foolish settlers, Arizona's southern population was leaving or gathering in points like Tucson for defense. Pete Kitchen was holding out in his valley fort with Mexican help, but scattered settlers like the Neals would have to leave or lose their hair. They already had, unless they had gone or hid out some place. Neal had mentioned the cellar he was building. Just maybe. . .

After his first furious spurt, Ike used more caution, but he made all the speed he could, his mind on Cathy. Cathy, whom Ike had planned to marry next month, as soon as he returned from the cattle drive to California. But the herd had been sold at Yuma, and Ike had lit a shuck back for Cathy. On the way his ears had soaked up the growing tales of Apache raids, and in Tubac yesterday the tales had risen to a jittery horror. Ike had left Tubac an hour after he arrived, fear driving him, knowing Jarred Neal's stubbornness.

His horse had broken a leg an hour before dawn. Not daring to risk a shot with his Colt, Ike had been forced to use the long knife at his belt on the horse. Shortly afterward he had discovered the Apache stalking him.

Ike moved at a jog trot when he could, and ran short distances in dry washes that pointed his way. The smoke had died to a wisp when Ike finally bellied up a ridge, wiggling through the rock to look down upon the cabin site.

There was only a dark square of smok-

ing ruins and another square where the barn had been. His gaze riveted on the two bloody, hacked bodies a hundred feet from the cabin. His eyes lifted to watch with searing hatred the lean figures quartering the small valley, weaving among the brush and tilled patches like questing hounds. Apaches, at least twenty of them.

They were searching for something or somebody, and that gave Ike some small hope. There were only two bodies, one of the Neals was still unfound. "Cathy." Ike's lips formed the name soundlessly. "Cathy. . ."

THE APACHES knotted near the bodies, scattered again, gesticulating, emitting an occasional whoop. The horse-holders had brought the ponies up and finally the others gathered there. They flung themselves on the ponies, raced away up the valley and disappeared.

Ike didn't move. The sun grew hot across his back and still he lay there. If those Indians thought someone still remained hidden here they wouldn't leave, not all of them. They would post scouts.

It was noon before Ike located the scouts, and cold sweat popped out on his face and sent a chill up his back. They were on the same ridge as he was, not a hundred yards away. But for the snort of a pony, he could easily have lost his own hair.

Ike considered the Indians' hiding spot and then the ground sloping away toward the cabin site. He decided that the Apaches would bear his way if they moved for the cabin site, the brush was thinner, the rocks less jumbled, and a ten-foot-wide wash slanted past to turn for the valley not thirty feet from Ike. That would be their course, easy going plus concealment by the brushy sides. He settled down to wait.

It was past noon when Ike saw Cathy. She came crawling cautiously from a jumble of rocks and debris near where the wash left the ridge, and twenty feet from the barn site. The cellar! Neal had built it under the barn instead of the house and with an exit, or entrance, far enough away to allow for escape.

The Apaches had seen her too. Ike heard their low grunts and glimpsed a dark head poked up there behind a rock. His gaze whipped back to Cathy in the same moment she saw her parents' bodies. She screamed, then screamed again, a horror choked sound, and ran wildly toward them.

The Apaches came out of hiding and were dark shapes flitting through the brush and rock, closing in for the kill.

Ike saw them come to the wash, and move down it, two stock shapes, light and silent as a vagrant breeze. He laid the barrel of the Colt over a rock, hot gray eyes on the Indians. They were forty feet away when they left the wash to skirt a pile of brush caught in its center. Ike lined the sights on the leading man and fired.

The slug stopped him, heeled him around, while the other leaped like a cat for the wash, his whoop ringing defiantly. Ike shot him, saw him stagger as he tried to leap into the wash. He shot him again as he dived headlong over the bank. Ike came to his feet running, no time now for stalking.

He came to the wash, leaped down the three-foot bank and saw the Indian lying there, and fired as his feet hit the sand. The Indian didn't move, and Ike saw the bloody, ragged patch in his side where the bullet had come out, and another like place behind his right ear. Ike went down the wash then at a run.

He pulled the sobbing girl away from the hacked, sun-blackened bodies. "Cathy. Cathy, we have to go, quick! If those others heard the shots. . . ." She fought him, eyes dilated with a wild, unreasoning horror.

He hit her with his open hand, slapping her the more savagely because he didn't want to hit her, hurt her, but knowing he had to do it. He slapped her again, then she was clinging to him, sobbing convulsively, but recognizing him now through the haze of hysteria.

He held her tightly, his hand stroking her dark hair, burying his face in its

depth and murmuring soft words to her.

Finally he said, "Cathy, we have to go. We'll try for Tucson. Our chances, maybe, will be best that way. The whole country is alive with Apaches. We have to, Cathy."

She nodded, and her face was dead white as she looked at him, the horror still in her eyes but under control. "Yes," she said. "We wanted to leave, mother and I, but Dad wouldn't. He depended on the cellar. Now they're dead."

She gripped his arms fiercely and cried again. "They had gone to get the blooded mare and her new colt, over in the next valley. Mother went along to help watch for Indians. When I saw them I went into the cellar, and prayed that they would see the smoke and hide. They must have tried to make it back to me. . ."

"Cathy," he said, "is there any food in the cellar? Jerky?" When she nodded, he said, "Get a poke of jerky, it'll be enough. Hurry now."

WATCHING AS SHE ran to the cellar entrance, he then hurried to drag the bodies to a small crevice at the base of the slope. He used a shovel with a burned-out handle to cover them with sand and gravel, and then carried rocks to pile over them. When he had finished, he saw Cathy coming slowly from the cellar, refusing to look his way. She had known what he was about to do, and had deliberately lingered.

He trotted to her, and saw that she had a small bag of jerky, a canteen of water and a Colt sixshooter with its gleaming caps. She handed him the pistol.

"I have another," she said, "a derringer that I'll use if we get caught." It was a simple statement of an accepted procedure, but it sent a chill up Ike's back to think of Cathy with that little gun pressed to her head.

"Come on," he said quickly, shoving the gun in his waistband.

They found the Apache ponies at the base of the ridge in a dry wash, and Ike noted with satisfaction that they appeared to be comparatively fresh. They had been tied up and couldn't eat, but from the absence of sweat rime and dried hair Ike knew they hadn't been ridden much since yesterday. He chose the gentler of the two half wild animals for Cathy and saw her mounted before he untied the one he would ride. They turned the ponies north toward Tucson fifty miles away.

Ike hated to risk daytime travel, but knew that he must. Those other Apaches would return to the Neal place today sometime, when the two left there failed to meet them. And when they discovered the evidence that other White Eyes had been there, from the buried Neals and the bodies of their own men, then they would come boiling after Ike and Cathy, fury urging them.

Ike kept the ponies at a fast trot, and dared not go faster and betray themselves with lifting dust. Too, the faster they went, the greater the chance of dashing headlong into an Apache ambush.

He reloaded his Colt and set it back in the holster. At least he had twelve shots now plus his knife, and Cathy had the derringer if he were killed. . .

Twice they saw Indians and were forced to conceal themselves and lay doggo. Ike fumed silently, trying to keep a watch on their back trail without alarming Cathy. They had covered ten or twelve miles and it was still an hour till sunset when Ike saw the first faint pall of dust behind them. The Apaches were on their trail, coming hard and fast.

He knew that Cathy was watching him, but he pretended interest in the trail ahead.

"They're coming, aren't they, Ike?" she asked at last.

He nodded. "Yes. It'll be close now, Cathy, we'll have to move fast ourselves and risk running into others."

He kicked his pony into a lope and she trailed him closely. Behind them, Ike could see their dust hanging in the translucent air of late afternoon. The Apaches would see it too.

As darkness closed around them, Ike gave the pony's head the most of his attention. He could never spot a camped war

party in time to avoid them unless there were fires, but the pony might warn him in time. He had pulled east enough so that they followed the course of the dry Santa Cruz, parallelling it roughly. That course would take them to Tucson and was easily followed.

IT WAS MIDNIGHT and a fat-bellied moon gave some light, when Ike saw the alerted ears of the little pony. He grabbed its nose, and snapped back at Cathy, "Watch the pony! Don't let it nicker!"

He left the pony's back, twisted a hastily ripped piece from Cathy's skirt around the pony's nose, being sure she held the twisted cloth before he released it, and then gave his mount the same treatment. This was no time to be considerate of the ponies, and it would keep their attention off those ponies ahead there.

He secured the twists of cloth, and while Cathy held the ponies in a clump of mesquite, he moved ahead, a silent shadow in the moccasins. He located the grazing ponies first, busily cropping the grass along the flat in a bend of the dry river bed. Beyond, at the rim of the herd, he saw a lone guard. The Indian was mounted, letting his pony graze, seemingly not too alert.

The Apaches were confident, the few settlers in the country here giving them no worry, most of them already dead. Ike remained motionless. There would likely be two guards, he thought. But failing to locate the other, he retraced his steps to Cathy.

"Indians," he whispered near her ear. "Must be ten-fifteen, from the ponies."

He considered the lay of the land. Across the river, the ground sloped upward, and they would be too much exposed with the moonlight. To make it worse, a ridge slanted down on this side, making an abutment on whose slope the Indians slept. It didn't give them much choice, they had to cross the river and make their try at slipping past.

Cathy suddenly gripped his arm and silently pointed. He looked, the Navy Colt coming into his hand. Toward the Indian horse herd, a shadow flitted in the pale light, coming toward them. It disappeared in a thin growth of brush thirty yards from the mesquite patch where they stood. Then the shadowy figure showed briefly again, closer.

Ike went to the ground, wiggled clear of the mesquite and came to crouch behind a cholla cactus. He shifted the Colt to his left hand and balanced the knife in his right.

The Indian wasn't twenty feet away now and inching closer. Behind Ike one of the ponies moved a little, then stamped. The Indian didn't move for another ten minutes. Then the ponies shifted again, and that seemed to decide him, for he inched up till he was no more than ten feet away, peering intently at the thicket of mesquite.

He was supicious, evidently figuring that a stray horse would have moved more or grazed out of the thicket by now. He turned, fading to the ground. Ike threw the knife and went after it in a silent charge.

The Indian came upward, and his cry was a jerked in breath before Ike hit him in the small of the back with a driving shoulder. The Navy Colt rose and fell twice and the Apache was a still huddle with a broken head. Ike removed the knife from his back, and wiped it on the breechclout. He went back to Cathy in a silent run.

"Something alarmed the guards, Cathy," he whispered. "The other one will be along in a minute. I'll have to try for him now. If you hear shooting, jump that pony and light out for Tucson and don't stop for nothing, not till that pony drops under you. You hear me?"

Her face was dead white, her eyes enormous. She gripped his sleeve and then threw herself into his arms. Silently, fiercely, he kissed her and her arms went around his neck.

After a moment, he removed her arms, and whispered, "Remember, Cathy, if you hear shooting, run."

He moved away.

THE SECOND GUARD was still mounted. He was riding at a walk toward Ike, craning his neck, head shifting like a questing snake. Ike gripped his knife and hugged the shadow of a mesquite, knowing the pony would scent him and give the alarm in another moment. The Indian was sideways to him, about to pass and the distance was long for knife work, but Ike's knife was heavy and he stepped out and threw.

The pony swung sharply away, and the Indian reeled, grabbing the handle of the knife where it protruded from his kidney. His whoop rang hard and abrupt before he spilled from the spooked pony's back. Ike hit him one, solidly with the Colt's barrel, then ripped free his knife and raced for Cathy and the horse.

Behind him, he heard the startled Indians awakening, yelling. Ike stopped, knowing something of the Apaches' superstitution. He gave the hoot of an owl, then held up his hand to Cathy as she came from the thicket with the horses. He hooted again, and the Apaches were abruptly silent. They would be frozen there, fearful for the moment, puzzled over the cry of the guard followed by the guards' silence and the hoot of the ill-omened owl.

Quickly Ike mounted, and picking his way carefully to avoid noise against rock or brush, he rode toward the Indian horse herd, Cathy close on his flank. Once among the skittish ponies, Ike removed his hat and charged among them, waving the hat furiously. The ponies scattered like quail, and motioning to Cathy, he charged away with them, the spurt putting them past the Indian camp.

They were well past and riding at a lope when the furious yell lifted behind them, and then a chorus of savage cries. The Apaches had found the dead guards, and his tracks, and would know that Bu, the owl, had actually been one of the hated White Eyes.

"Let's ride, Cathy," Ike called back to her. "They'll come howling after us as soon as they can round up some horses, but at least that'll give us a bit of time."

The Apache didn't like to fight at night, but he could and would. This insult to them would make them fight the devil himself. The one chance the white couple had now was speed. Tucson still lay a good twenty miles ahead and the little Indian ponies, tough as they were, had covered a lot of ground already without food or rest.

The band of Indians that had followed them from the burned-out Neal place couldn't be far behind, not the way they had been coming as darkness fell. When they came to this camp, it would be no chore for the mounted Indians to round up the scattered horses. But it would be an hour, perhaps two hours, before pursuit came, and then it would probably be from the fifteen or so that would ride the fresher ponies from this camp. Those others would be dead beat after twenty miles or so of hard riding plus the day of riding the Indians had done after leaving the Neal home.

They still had a chance, Ike thought, and it might pay them to let their own ponies have an hour or so of rest.

Two hours later, they came to a spiny ridge on the far side of a long stretch of fairly level terrain that Ike estimated to be five miles across. He pulled up at a small seep that had thick grass.

"We'll let the ponies graze and drink, Cathy. You hold them and I'll climb that ridge yonder and keep watch. We can make Tucson not long after daylight if we can rest the ponies a little."

He left her and trotted to the ridge, carrying a handful of the jerky, and Cathy's canteen. He took up his post and chewed on the jerky and drank water from the canteen.

It was about an hour and a half later that he saw the feather of dust far across the flat. He left his post and trotted back to Cathy and the ponies.

"They're coming, Cathy," he said. "From now on it'll be a race—if we don't run into some more." He didn't elaborate, but they both knew that they couldn't survive any further pressure.

They pushed the ponies as fast as they

dared. Ike reckoned the travel still left in the little ponies and set the pace accordingly, wanting to save a last burst of speed in case it was needed.

BY DAWN, the little ponies were laboring, their short lope a choppy, jarring gait, and Tucson was yonder with smoke from its cook fires already visible in the still dawn.

There was other smoke visible, too. Ike saw a column of it climbing into the air behind them, breaking into puffs that told of their passing and location. Behind, but much closer, were the pursuing Indians, beating the last ounce of speed from their now laboring mounts. They were no more than a mile back and closing in.

Sweat stood out on Ike's brow. Their own ponies would never make it at a dead run, they were too beaten. But they could make it at their present choppy lope. He cursed under his breath, wondering briefly if he could get Cathy to go on if he should have to make a fight of it. To get her this close and have them take her was an almost unbearable irony.

He kept his alert watch behind, doggedly holding the slow lope while the Indians behind, screaming in rage, belabored the ponies they rode with bow and lance and rifle. With agonizing slowness, the town drew near until Ike could see the adobe buildings and even distinguish animated specks that were people gathering to watch the chase.

But the Apaches behind drew closer, too close, and Ike knew that he and Cathy would have to make a run until the ponies dropped. An outburst from the girl brought his attention around. She was pointing off to their right.

"Look, Ike!" she screamed. "More of them!"

Ike looked with sinking heart. This third group of Indians had seen the smoke signals, and being close, were riding to cut them off from town. They were coming at a flailing run, the ponies stretched out. These were fresh ponies, and the Indians riding them would win out, Ike could see. Even with a greater distance to go, the new force of Apaches would still cut them off. The ponies that Ike and Cathy rode were just too beaten to make it at more than the lunging run they now managed, and under him, Ike could feel the slackening muscles of his jaded mount.

They had lost the ride at the very gates of Tucson.

The latest group of twenty or more Apaches came on with alarming swiftness, and the morning sun glinted on lifted lances, showed the foam flying from the open mouths of the hard running ponies. And with the lessening distance, the triumphant whoops of the Apaches cut clearly through the early morning air.

Ahead at the town, Ike could see the men plainly now, see them running and gesturing to one another. Ike gave his pony an extra burst of speed, then its legs seemed to give way at all joints and it went down. Ike hit the ground running. He stumbled and fell headlong.

He rolled to his feet and roared at Cathy who was hauling at the hackamore of her own mount, "Go on, Cathy! Damn it, keep going!"

But she hauled hard on the rawhide thong and her own pony tried to stop and went to its knees. It lay over as Cathy jumped off. She came running back to Ike then, and Ike knew that this was it. Both ponies were down, and Tucson still lay a quarter of a mile ahead. But not the Indians.

They spread out now, wheeling their horses a little to charge directly at Ike and Cathy. Ike pulled the pair of Navy Colts, fired one bullet to finish his pony, and shoved Cathy down against its body and kneeled beside her.

He could hear the growing triumphant squalls of the pursuing Indians, but this other bunch would be first, and as they closed in, Ike lifted the Navy gun and emptied it with a calm deliberation that sent four Indians tumbling off their mounts, the last one rolling right against the fallen pony.

The thundering, deadly Colt had swerved the Indians, but arrows stuck from the dead pony, and lances quivered

there too. Then the Apache charge had swept past, and Ike gave Cathy the empty Colt, shifting the second to his right hand. His left arm didn't behave right, and he became aware of its numbness before he saw the arrow shaft protruding from his shoulder.

The new Indians had mingled with the pursuing bunch now, and together they were coming back, squalling furiously, howling like demons, and Ike knew that this was it. This time his gun would not turn them . . .

ARROWS WHIZZED and skipped about them and studded into the pony. Bullets from old muskets screeched off the earth. Ike lifted his gun and commenced firing, and heard the other Colt join in as Cathy fired beside him.

The savage horde closed on them, and Ike heard the popping of guns pick up, the renewed screaming of the Indians, the sound a rising fury. He didn't realize they were past again until he found himself snapping the empty Colt at nothing, shaking his head, peering to clear the haze around him. Guns were still racketing, the Indians still screeching but with diminishing power.

"Ike!" Cathy screamed at him. "Ike they're leaving. The men from town—" She broke off with a scream, then screamed again.

The Indian came off the ground, his whole belly and chest bloody, and lunged at Ike with flashing knife. Ike lashed out with the Colt, and the ring of it against the knife was a faint sound in his roaring ears. The Apache's war whoop added to the roar.

The Colt spun away out of Ike's hand. He grasped the Apache's wrist and forced the seeking knife away from his throat. His left arm was useless, the Colt gone. But he had the knife wrist, and Ike put all his strength into a twist as he brought the Indian's arm around his body, driving his shoulder against the greasy body. They fell together, and he heard the Apache grunt as he fell on him. But Ike's strength was rapidly failing and he could barely see through the haze over his eyes.

He felt the sting of the knife against his stomach and dimly heard Cathy screaming something at him. He clung grimly to the wrist, trying to think what to do but unable to because of the haze that seemed to veil his mind.

Abruptly the Apache went limp, and Ike rolled free, seeing the figure of Cathy again at the Indian's head.

"Cathy," he said. "Thanks, Cathy . . ."

Men were all around him then, and strong hands lifted him up. They put him on a horse and a man held him, his soft Spanish accent like music to Ike's ringing ears.

"Look at the red devils!" Ike heard a man yell. "Boy are they hopping mad! Listen to 'em threaten! They was shore counting on these two scalps!"

They were let down in the shade of an adobe in the plaza, and Cathy was quickly beside him.

"Cathy," he said, "Are you all right?"

"Just a couple of scratches," she said. "Be still now, Ike, you've got an arrow in your shoulder, and a lance wound on your head. The knife didn't do much damage."

Ike grinned and said weakly, "Shucks, honey, with you beside me we could whip a hundred Indians! If we had fast enough horses, that is."

She pulled his head tightly against her breast, pressing her lips to his. "You'll get that chance, Ike," she said, "to be beside me. From now on, darling, you've got a woman you can't get rid of!"

Ike sighed contentedly. "I'd be an awful fool to try, Cathy," he said.

Three Rousing Action Novels of the West by Frank P. Castle, Jim Mayo and Roe Richmond in the Spring Issue of TRIPLE WESTERN

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LIKKER and LAUGHTER

By STAN HOIG

A Fact Story of Cowtown Swigglers

BACK in the days when the West was still woolly and cowboys had real hair on their chests, whisky was quite often a wild concoction of raw alcohol, cut-plug tobacco and other potent ingredients. Nevertheless most cowboys drank. While it is possible that a few sober sons partook solely as a prescription for snake-bite, there were a good many less snake-bitten waddies than there were those who dearly loved their courage-maker.

The cowtown saloon was the meeting place for cowboys in town. They could meet the boys from the other ranches, exchange horse and cow talk, and hoist a few. "Bending an elbow" was a means of relaxing from the tiresome, dusty work of the

range, and the usual Saturday night "let-all-hell-roar" in letting the cowboy blow off accumuuated steam was undeniably essential to harmony on the range.

Plenty of Dead Soldiers

Once, at Tascosa, Texas, when a waddy on a spree was arrested and tossed into the town's new rock-walled jailhouse it did not take him long to discover that while the walls were strong enough, the building had been built upon the loose sands beside the Canadian River. He promptly scratched his way out, and returned to his celebrating. He was as promptly arrested again and this time was tied to the center post of the saloon, given a blanket, and left there for the night.

The sheriff should have known it was a mistake to leave that waddy where he could be tempted by rows of liquor bottles in sight. During the night, choosing between internal or external warmth, he made a rope of torn strips of the blankets and lassoed the bottles off the shelf. When they found him the next morning he was too drunk to shiver.

In New Mexico, a saloon owner was mystified to discover that a barrel of apparently untapped whisky was all but gone. And a certain cowhand had been strangely "unsober" of late.

The mystery was solved when the saloonkeeper found that the enterprising cowboy had wriggled under the warehouse, drilled up through the floor with a brace and bit, and had been helping himself through means of a brass faucet.

Another cowboy, who had long since overextended his credit at a saloon, waited until the bartender wasn't looking his way and slipped a long rubber hose into the whisky keg which was kept on the bar. Seating himself nearby, he proceeded to help himself from behind the cover of a newspaper. When a crash came later, the waddy was found lying in a puddle of whisky which was still oozing from the end of the rubber hose, out cold.

Charlie Russell, famous cowboy painter, liked to tell the story of the cowboy who was complaining about how crazy Indians were for whisky.

"It's a doggone shame," the rider declared, according to the painter, "how an Injun goes plumb crazy for firewater. Why, just the other day I was riding along and meets an Injun. Right off he smells out this quart of hootch I got in my saddle-bag, and damned if he don't offer me the horse he's riding for that bottle. I only paid six dollars for the red-eye, but that horse is worth all of a hundred. Now ain't that something!"

"Did you swap with him?"

"Why, hell no! I just had the one bottle!"

When the cook of one ranch was sent to town for supplies he was gone for some time before he got back, slightly crooked in his saddle. He had brought eight quarts of whisky and a loaf of bread from town. One of the hands, helping him unload, spat disgustedly and asked:

"Now just what the hell are we going to do with all that bread?"

Cow country men knew many effective ways of sobering up anyone who needed it, and one of the best was to rope a cowboy and jerk him off his horse. He usually arose considerably sobered. Sometimes, however, the celebrating cowboy was a bit too free with his own rope. One once decided to rope the smoke-stack of a train which was moving along at a twenty-mile-per-hour clip. By the time the cowboy managed to get himself, his rope and his saddle free, he was sober enough not to try that stunt again.

Tarantula Juice

A Dodge City, Kansas, citizen in the early days, a lawyer noted for his brilliant mind, became such a slave to the liquor habit that even Dodge became mildly embarrassed at his behavior. Some of the boys decided to do something about it.

It was agreed that the lawyer needed a dose of the "Dodge City Keely Cure." Waiting until he was super-charged with booze and had fallen away from the bar in a stupor, they procured a coffin, attired

the lawyer in a shroud and prepared him for the "long sleep." They powdered his features to give him the appearance of death, and placed him in the coffin. They informed the town that the lawyer had passed on, and displayed his remains.

The man remained in the coffin for several hours before he awakened, to discover what had happened to him. He caught sight of himself in a mirror, and was so horrified he gave up drinking.

Some cowboys liked to brag about their capacity for consuming whisky no matter how fiery hot the potion might be. One such cowboy swaggered into Judge Roy Bean's Jersey Lily Saloon and demanded the strongest drink in the house.

Judge Bean served him some whisky, but the cowboy promptly spat it out.

"Hell! I didn't ask for sasperilla! I want real tarantula juice!"

Judge Bean was generally prepared for such customers. On the shelf behind the bar was a bottle of alcohol, and in it floated two dead tartantulas. He poured the cowboy a shot of it. Some say the waddy drank the "pizen" and died with his boots on, while others claim he merely left in a big hurry, and never came back.

Tom Smith, which was as good a name as any in the early days of Caldwell, Kansas, invariably saw snakes on "the morning after." This offered possibilities to the boys around town. After one of his sprees they rented a monkey from an organ grinder and put it in Tom's room.

Tom awoke about breakfast time and saw the monkey at the foot of his bed, chattering away and cutting up with monkey tricks. Tom was sure that he "had them" again, but nevertheless he aimed his six-shooter at the apparition and pulled back the hammer.

"Old fellow," he said, "if you ain't a monkey, I'm in a bad way. But if you are a monkey, you're in a hell of a fix."

He pulled the trigger and down came the luckless animal. And the would-be jokers lost a hundred-dollar monkey.

The cowboy's sentiment toward whisky is well-expressed in the story of the waddy who once visited Oklahoma—before prohibition, of course—and was treated to an "Oklahoma breakfast." A bottle of whisky, some bologna sausage, and a dog. When he wanted to know what the dog was for, he was told that it was there to eat the sausage.

Two standard jokes concerning drinking are typical examples of range humor. One tells of an easterner who, newly arrived in the West, saw three men rolling a fourth over a barrel.

"By Jove, did he drown?" exclaimed the tenderfoot.

"Nope. Took a drink of water by mistake."

The other is the story of a man who returned home to find a corpse lying in front of his house.

"Who shot him?" he asked a bystander.

"Nobody."

"Oh, he drank too much whisky?"

"Nope."

"Well then, he ain't dead. They don't die no other way around here."

Pure Pizen

Cowboys drank in a spirit of fun, for friendly companionship. There was nothing scientific about their drinking. When a rider decided to get drunk, he merely poured down as much liquor as he could hold and stood up as long as possible afterward.

Likewise, he knew when to leave it alone. A group of cowboys were playing poker in a saloon one day, and in the group was one cowhand who was subject to epileptic fits. They were playing along and passing a bottle around among themselves, when a stranger entered the saloon and stood at the bar, watching them.

He had just ordered a drink when the epileptic gulped a shot of whisky and went into a fit. The stranger shoved his one drink back at the bartender.

"Oh no, you don't," he said. "You ain't going to get me to drink any of that damn whisky. And if that gent has any pards around here, they'll drag him away from this place pronto!"

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range

News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

At the age of thirteen Count Felix Von Luckner left his home in Germany in search of his idol, Buffalo Bill. He traveled more than 20,000 miles, making the last 1000 miles on foot from Frisco to Denver. On his arrival he learned that Buffalo Bill was visiting in Germany—a guest in his own home there.

People are forever calling it the Rio Grande River, which is wrong. It's redundant, which means you've chewed your cabbage twice. Since Rio means river in Spanish, there's no point in attaching an extra river in English. Sabe savvy?

The American Indian usually mounts his horse from the right side instead of the left. This custom is believed to date back to the days when he carried his bow in his left hand and therefore found it easier to mount from the right side. Sounds right enough to us.

It is estimated that the famed Battle of Little Big Horn, where Custer's last stand took place, lasted only twenty minutes.

We may have said this before, but cowboys don't wear boots with pointed toes and heels just to be fancy, as some people seem to think. The toe is pointed for easy entry into the stirrup, and the heel is two inches high to prevent the rider's foot from going through the stirrup. And when you come right down to it, we suspect that this valuable bit of information should be classified as a heel of a note.

The deepest oil well in the world is in Sublette County, Wyoming. It's 20,521 feet deep—and didn't produce a drop of oil! Which saves Texas a heap of embarrassment, doubtless. No whole dry holes there.

The Pascagoula River, which was named after the Pasca Oocooloo Indians, produces a mysterious "music" that sounds much like that made by a swarm of bees. It can best be heard in the stillness of summer evenings, and though there have been many theories as to its cause, legend has it that the music is the death chant of Indian tribesmen who, facing defeat, marched into the river to their deaths.

It is reported that Mr. and Mrs. S. D. Smith of Tucson, Arizona, found in the pool of their home—guess what? An alligator! What makes this noteworthy, of course, is that Tucson is famous for its lack of alligators. Pink elephants, too. Amen.

CHAPTER I

Road Agent's Rout

THE night was cold, clear, and crisp, with a million stars glittering in the dark Nevada sky. The Concord rolled up and over the grades, thoroughbraces creaking, chains rattling, the hooves of the six-horse team making rhythmic melody against the half-frozen earth.

Sad Sam Bones lay among the mail-bags on the roof of the coach, one leg sprawled over the railing, one hand clutching the brown derby hat resting on his chest. Listening to the vague night sounds he thought he heard horses running through the sagebrush to the right, parallel with the stage.

He lifted his head to stare into the darkness, but if there were

TOO TOUGH

A Novelet by GEORGE KILRAIN

A little man can be as tough as the hairiest big man—when standing behind a Navy Colt

riders in the brush they couldn't be seen. A faint smile slid across Sad Sam's forlorn face when he considered the possibility of a hold-up. He had two silver dollars, but he'd heard in Crescent City that road agents on this run were interested only in the express box beneath the driver's feet.

From inside the coach he heard rasping sounds, choking and gurgling sounds—the snores of nine sleeping people. And on the roof of the Concord Sad Sam lay with a horse blanket for a covering and mail-bags for his pillow.

In Crescent the driver had looked at his ten passengers and stowed nine of them inside. He'd look at Sad Sam—five-feet-four-inches, a hundred and thirty pounds, in crumpled checked suit and brown derby, tattered winged collar and polka-dot bow tie pressed against

The slug smashed a tomato in the hand of one of the toughs

his Adam's apple by an elastic band. He'd looked into Sam's mild blue eyes, meek eyes with a trace of sadness in them, and said gruffly:

"Upstairs, Jack."

Sad Sam had made no objections, even though having paid full fare. He preferred riding outside when the nights were clear, preferred soft night wind to snores and the smoke-filled interior of the stage.

THE driver, a blocky man with a hare-lip, silent and morose, had glanced at him disdainfully a few times that afternoon, but had not asked him to come sit on the seat. An important man like a stage-coach driver couldn't be bothered with a baggy little fellow who could have been a drummer or a pill doctor—anything except the theatrical entertainer he was.

Apparently now the driver had not heard the sound of running horses that Sam had heard. Probably he was too close to the jingling chains and the hammer-beat of hooves to hear vague sounds in the sagebrush.

But Sad Sam heard the horses again—clearly—and this time much closer, as if they were preparing to sweep in suddenly and cut across the path of the stage. Sam wondered if he should even bother to inform this brusque, ill-tempered driver that his stage was about to be held up.

It meant nothing to Sam. The lowest of stage robbers would not relieve a poor man of his last two dollars. Sam had been in a dozen hold-ups, and in each only Wells Fargo had been the loser.

Nevertheless, since Sam was an honest man, he pursed his lips and, scarcely moving them, said in a squeaky voice:

"Mister, there's riders off to your right."

It was not the peculiar voice, nor the message, which made the driver almost drop the reins. It was where the voice had come from—a few feet to the left, up in the air where no one could possibly be. Desperately he clutched the reins, staring out into the night, mouth open, jaw sagging.

Sam repeated his message, and this time it came from a spot above the driver's head.

Once, when Sam had been a young entertainer who sang mournful ditties and told droll tales, he'd traveled for six months with a ventriloquist from whom he had learned how to astound an audience of miners, cowpunchers and gambling sharps by making a chair or a stray dog talk. Now he had tried it on this driver who muttered something and spun around, his face bathed in sweat. He was trembling as he said to Sam:

"You—you hear that, Jack?"

"What?" Sad Sam asked innocently, and then riders were coming at a gallop through the sagebrush. Three masked figures loomed up out of the darkness. One spurred to stop the team, the other two raced for the coach.

Two shots were fired and the driver brought his horses to a stop. Sad Sam sat up and put on his derby hat, watching the bandits complacently as one of them growled:

"Everybody out—pronto!"

Inside the coach all was confusion. Sam heard the babble of sleepy, bewildered voices, then the passengers were stumbling out, hands over their heads. The driver leaped down at the command of one of the road agents, but Sam sat where he was, his head showing over the railing.

A man swore violently, "Get the hell down here—you!"

Sam clambered down to the ground, moving with alacrity to the end of the line of passengers when one of the road agents kicked the seat of his pants with a heavy boot. Sad Sam's blue eyes lost their mild expression.

He stood in the darkness near the rear of the coach, a forlorn little man whose checked coat was too loose, whose trousers were baggy at the knees, and who wore stub-toed Eastern shoes. But he had an artificial yellow flower in the buttonhole of the coat.

Strangely, the road agents were not going after the express box. They were not robbing the passengers, either. Their

leader, standing in front of the ten passengers and the driver said gruffly, definitely trying to disguise his voice:

"Any show people here?"

SAD SAM'S lips parted in surprise. In Crescent City a week before he'd contracted by mail with a Mr. Bolton Fifer to appear on his stage in the town of Tamarack, the big silver city. Sam Bones knew *he* was a show person. So was the big baritone, Frederick Hallman, whom Sam had seen climbing aboard the stage. Sam knew that Hallman, too, was under contract to play Fifer's hall. He didn't know of any other show people on the stage.

But Hallman, a barrel-shaped man with red hair, did not answer the bandit leader's question, or step from the line. In the light of the coach's lamps which faintly illuminated the line of people standing on the road, the road agent stalked grimly to Frederick Hallman and said tersely:

"You stepping out, mister, or you want a bullet in your damned backbone?"

The singer jumped out in front of the others. Sad Sam promptly moved up beside Hallman who towered head and shoulders above him.

The leader of the road agents stared at Sam over the top of his black handkerchief mask. He said curiously, "You mean you're playing Fifer's in Tamarack?"

"That's right," Sam said.

He looked so pathetic, seemed to shrink so when the bandit approached him that a woman passenger said quickly:

"He hasn't done anything. Let him alone."

The road agent laughed and Sad Sam filed away in his mind, for future reference, the sound of that laugh.

The second bandit said brusquely, "That's all there is. Only two of 'em on this stage."

"Everybody back inside the stage," the leader snapped, "except you two." He nodded to the trembling Hallman and little Sad Sam.

Hallmon mumbled, "They—they going to shoot us?"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Sam said.

The road agents had made no attempt to search them for weapons, probably assuming that show people did not go armed, or if they did would be too frightened to use their weapons.

When the last passenger was back in the coach, the bandit leader said to Hallman and Sam, "March down the road."

As they walked away in front of him there was a quizzical expression on Sad Sam's face. He didn't believe he or the baritone were going to be killed or robbed. The hold-up man hadn't bothered with even more prosperous-looking passengers. Sam couldn't make it out.

When they were twenty-five yards down the lonely road, the bandit said gruffly, "That's enough, boys. Turn around."

They turned around—and looked into the barrel of a big sixgun. Sad Sam looked at it interestedly, his eyes shaded by his brown derby.

The road agent said softly, "So you boys figure on playing Fifer's Palace in Tamarack?"

Hallman said uneasily, "I signed a contract with Mr. Fifer's representative."

The man behind the mask laughed. "You'll never play Tamarack, friend. If you do, it'll be your last appearance on any stage." He added, "There's a stagecoach through here in two hours, heading for Frisco. You boys can walk back to the Red Rock swing station and get on that stage. You'll be across the Nevada border before morning."

Sad Sam said innocently, "May I ask why?"

The man brutally jammed the muzzle of the sixgun into Sam's breastbone, snapped, "You can ask why in hell I don't blow your brains out instead of asking you polite-like to get the hell out of Nevada."

Sam stepped back half a step, his blue eyes turning slightly greenish. The senseless brutality started little devils dancing inside him.

He said softly, "Pardon me, friend," and kicked out with his right foot, kicked straight and hard without appearing to, looking straight into the road agent's face, his body erect and balanced, though standing on one leg and kicking violently with the other.

The hard tip of the Eastern shoe caught the bandit in the left shin. He let out a howl of pain and leaped back. Sad Sam's hand moved, and from the voluminous folds of his checked coat a big Navy Colt suddenly appeared, blue barrel shining in the starlight. He slapped that long barrel smartly against the bandit's skull, dropping him to his knees. Sam skipped off into the brush, running back toward the stalled coach.

HE FIRED twice, putting both shots a little over the heads of the two men guarding the coach. One of them yelled in alarm, and a slug screamed over Sam's head. He dropped to the ground, fired again into the air to frighten the men, who rode wildly off into the sagebrush.

The stage driver suddenly scooped up a shotgun from the seat and opened up with it, the sound booming across the open spaces. Smiling faintly, Sad Sam strolled out of the brush.

He said to the driver, "There's another one down the road. We might bring him in to Tamarack for questioning."

The heavy-set driver stared at Sam in amazement. He gulped, "You chased 'em alone?"

"I fired a few shots," Sam admitted. "I'd have been afraid to tackle them without your help."

Shotgun under his arm, the driver started off down the road with Sam while the passengers tumbled out of the coach.

"We chased 'em off!" the driver yelled back proudly. "I'll get every one of you into Tamarack safe and sound!" Then he asked curiously, studying Sam's size, "How in hell you get away from that holdup, mister?"

"I had a gun," Sam said simply. "He neglected to search me."

The drover nodded and rubbed his chin. Doubtless he was remembering that *he'd* had a gun, also, a heavy-gauge double-barreled shotgun he'd been afraid to use.

Frederick Hallman came running to meet them, panting and flushed, and gasping, "They gone—they gone?"

"We chased 'em," the driver said. "Where's the other feller?"

"He got up when he heard the shooting," Hallman explained, "and ran into the brush."

Sam shook his head ruefully. "I would have liked to have the authorities question him. I should have hit him slightly harder."

"Sure," the driver muttered, and stared again at Sad Sam. He said suddenly, "What in hell did they want with you show people?"

Sam said, "We might find out in Tamarack."

Hallman didn't say anything as he climbed into the coach after the other passengers, but at the next swing station when a change of horses was made, nine passengers got out of the coach to stretch their legs, and only eight got back in.

The driver explained as Sad Sam made himself comfortable on the mail-bags and the coach started up again, "Mr. Hallman figures he'll go back to Frisco. He's changed his damned mind about Tamarack."

Sad Sam stared up at the bright stars. "Maybe," he said softly, "Mr. Hallman is wise."

They were moving away from the small swing station when the driver said abruptly, "Say, did you hear something right before them road agents hit us?"

"What sort of something?" Sam wanted to know.

"Like talking," the driver muttered. "Like talking in the air."

Sam said gently, "Maybe you'd better drive without a bottle under the seat next time."

An hour before, that driver would have given Sam a large piece of his mind for that comment. Now he just looked at him, cracked his whip, and sent the fresh

horses down the white ribbon of road at a pace which tumbled the passengers about inside the coach every time they hit ruts.

CHAPTER II

"Get Out of Town"

IT WAS two hours before dawn when the Concord rolled into the main street of Tamarack, a booming silver town perched on the south flank of Sun Mountain.

Sad Sam had heard that Tamarack was a hell-on-wheels town that never slept, and that seemed to be true. Even at this hour plenty of people were in the streets, and saloons and gambling houses were going full blast. Miners were coming out of the ground, finishing the night shift, and all anxious for a drink or a whirl at bucking the tiger before turning in.

From his seat on top of the stage-coach, Sad Sam could look into the big gambling houses as the Concord rolled along. Many horses and carriages were still outside the larger establishments.

He spotted Fifer's Palace Theatre at one of the main intersections. It was the largest building in town, two stories high, and occuping an entire corner. Sad Sam whistled softly. Mr. Bolton Fifer was in a mighty fine position to make plenty of money—either with his theatre, or by selling the property, with real estate values being what they were in these boom towns.

A dance hall on the corner opposite Fifer's was going full swing, but Sam was not particularly interested in the dancing miners and percentage girls. What caught his eyes were the free lunch counters in the saloons along the main street, and he meant to make a bee-line for one. He was ravenously hungry after his all-night ride, but he saw no good reason for paying for a meal out of his two dollars, if he could get it some other way.

It wasn't Sad Sam's fault, entirely, that he was broke. He had made out fairly well in Crescent where he had played for two weeks. But on his last night in town he'd heard of a widow of a Wells Fargo express messenger who had been shot by road agents. She had four small children, and was trying to care for them by doing the washing for the entertainers at the Crescent City Opera House.

Sad Sam had purchased his passage to Tamarack, and sent the rest of his money, except for that two dollars, to the widow. He'd sent it anonymously, without expecting thanks. And it wasn't the first time that had happened. Wherever Sad Sam Bones had played, other widows, stove-up punchers, crippled, blind or aged people had been tided over some rough places by money brought by a messenger who had been vague about the sender.

When the stage pulled into the yard of the express company in Tamarack, Sad Sam descended from the roof. Gripping a battered carpet-bag, he moved up the main street, with his face forlorn. But his mild blue eyes, shadowed by the brim of his brown derby, were dancing with pleasurable anticipation. Here was a new town, new faces, new people. He liked that.

He walked into the Alabama Saloon, made his way carefully through the crowd, and dropped his bag behind the piano in one corner. There was no one at the piano, so Sad Sam sat down on the stool, dusted the keys with a handkerchief, and began to play.

His long, nimble fingers flashed over the keys at terrific speed as he played a Chopin waltz. When he heard the crowd quiet down, and he knew he had their attention, he switched into a ludicrously funny little song. His plaintive voice made it doubly droll. Going into the last verse, he deftly dropped his derby on the floor back of the piano stool and winked gravely at those nearest him.

Coins clinked into the hat before he'd finished, and in answer to the generous applause he sang another song—a sorrowful one about a girl he'd left behind him.

More coins dropped into the hat, and men guffawed.

When he turned around, every man in the place was grinning. He bowed politely, scooped up the hat, deposited the coins in his pocket and headed for the free lunch counter.

THE bartender pushed a schooner of beer in his direction. He said gruffly, "On the house, Jack."

Sad Sam helped himself at the counter, drank the beer, and felt contented. Everybody in the saloon was smiling at him.

The man at his left said pleasantly, "Planning to play at Fifer's?"

"That's right," Sam said.

"You'll starve while you're waiting," the man told him cheerfully. "Fifer's Palace has been closed for two weeks. Damned if anyone knows when it will open."

"Alterations?" Sam wanted to know.

"Actors," the man said. "Fifer can't seem to get 'em. He gets a show lined up, then there are cancellations. Whole damned cast of *The Fireman's Daughter* walked out a few weeks ago because the audience was too rough."

Sam lifted his eyebrows and said, "So Mr. Fifer is closed at the present time?"

"Reckon he's trying to open all right," the man explained. "Got young Spalding chasing all over the country looking for play folks."

Sam Bones was considering this as he finished his lunch-counter meal, then crossed over to the Almonte Hotel and got a room. He turned in and slept until ten o'clock in the morning.

Dressed and shaved, he went directly to the Palace Theatre. A flight of stairs led up to the office that opened off a small ante-room. Sam sat down to wait. He heard a girl speaking in the office, then heard the flustered voice of a man.

The girl came out a moment later, and smiled at Sam. She was young, had chestnut hair, and steady brown eyes. She was not show people.

She said, "What can I do for you, sir?"

Sam told her briefly of the letters he had received from Mr. Fifer, wanting him to come to Tamarack. He produced the letters for her to read.

A fat man came out of the office—a man with a semi-bald head and a bewildered red face. He had baby-blue eyes and several sets of chins. He was rubbing his chubby, fat hands together, shaking his head.

The girl said to him, "This is Mr. Bones, Uncle Bolton. He played in Crescent City."

"Bones—Bones?" the fat man muttered. Then his face brightened. "Yes—yes, of course. Come in, Mr. Bones." He nodded at the girl. "My niece, Polly Fifer."

Sad Sam mumbled an acknowledgement and followed the fat man into the office. The girl came behind them, saying, "At least we have one act now, Uncle Bolton."

The office was small, plastered with pictures of great theatrical performers. Edwin Booth's classic features looked down from the wall, as did Lily Langtry, and Jenny Lind, the famous singer who had been brought to this country by the circus impresario, P. T. Barnum. A whole troupe of Shakespearean actors and actresses stared out of one long, brown photograph. There were fewer "variety" actors, like Sam.

Sam said quietly, "I understand you are having difficulty putting on a show, Mr. Fifer."

Fat Bolton Fifer shook his head in disgust. "Troubles," he muttered. "Troubles—troubles—troubles."

Sam felt sorry for him. It was plain that the fat man was not a businessman, Sam figured that Fifer loved to put on shows, preferably Shakespearean plays or other high-class dramas, but was having a hard time handling the complex business of a theatre. He had reached the point where the smallest thing upset him.

"We were expecting the baritone, Frederick Hallman, on the same stage with you, Mr. Bones," the girl said. "Did you meet him?"

Briefly Sam explained the reason for

Frederick Hallman's sudden change of mind.

"I was interested in knowing," he finished, "why those hold-up men didn't want us to come to Tamarack, but couldn't find out."

"I'd like to know myself," Fifer groaned. He looked at the girl in dismay. He said, "What will we do now, Polly? I had depended upon Hallman."

The chestnut-haired Polly smiled grimly, courageously. She said, "We'll see if Jack was able to bring anyone from Denver. He should be in in the morning." Turning to Sad Sam, she said, "I'd like to see your act, Mr. Bones, before signing a contract."

SAM nodded. He followed her down the stairs and into the big, empty theatre. The Palace was even bigger than it looked to be from the outside. There was a rear balcony, and side balconies. The main floor could accommodate four or five hundred people.

With Polly Fifer sitting down in front, Sam went through his act, playing the piano and singing, telling his stories. doing a clever softshoe dance. When he bowed himself off the stage he accidentally bumped into a chair near one wing.

The chair called after him ruefully, "Watch where you're going, Jack."

The girl applauded. Sam already had caught her grinning at his stories. He did an encore, and when he finished, someone in the back of the big, darkened theatre clapped vigorously.

Then a dark-haired young man strode down the aisle, smiling, revealing even teeth. He had nice features, too.

"Jack!" Polly Fifer cried, and went into the arms he held out to her.

Sam went over to the piano and tickled the keys with one hand, not wanting to hear what they said, but he did hear snatches of their conversation. Jack Spalding, whom Fifer had mentioned as his representative, had been fairly successful in Denver. He'd signed up a Shakespearean troupe, and the actors would be in Tamarack the following night. With this troupe young Spalding believed they could put the Palace Theatre back on its feet.

Introduced to the young man a few minutes later. Sad Sam liked him immediately. Spalding had enthusiasm, vigor. He loved the theatre. He'd been surprised to learn that miners liked Will Shakespeare as well as comics of Sad Sam's caliber.

Sam asked quietly, "Who's after the Palace, Mr. Spalding?"

Jack Spalding shook his head. "Mr. Fifer seems to feel that a rival wants to open a theatre in Tamarack and is trying to close us up first."

This let in some light on the subject, so Sam asked, "Does Mr. Fifer know of anyone?"

Spalding shook his head. "All we know is that somebody is trying to keep the Palace closed. Stages have been stopped and talent, on the way to Tamarack, politely warned that they had better turn around and go the other way. Toughs in the balconies have interfered with plays. At every turn we have been hampered until the public is losing interest in the theatre."

"Anyone offer to buy the place?" Sam wanted to know.

Jack Spalding looked at him quickly. "Only Jason West, a local attorney, who told Mr. Fifer before this trouble began that if he wanted to sell, he might know of a buyer." Spalding scowled. "It's hard to fight back when you don't know who you are fighting."

Sam said, "I'll take a look around town. I might be able to find out something."

Spalding smiled at him. "Don't get into trouble on our account, Mr. Bones. This is a pretty hard town."

"I'll be careful," Sam told him, nodded to Polly and walked up the aisle to the door.

Outside, it was a bright, crisp fall morning, with brilliant sunlight filling the streets. Sam walked along C Street, humming softly. As he passed the office of Jason West, the lawyer, he could see the hawk-faced man at his desk behind

the plate-glass window. West was a lean, lank man with thin brown hair, a prow of a nose, and sharp, intense blue eyes.

Sad Sam kept going, hands in his pockets. As he passed the Rose of Sharon Saloon a group of miners standing in front of the place were involved in a deep argument. A stray dog sat on the top step of the porch, yawning, tongue lolling.

As Sam went by the dog said, "You boys are all wrong."

In the deathlike silence that followed, Sam moved on down the street, still humming, brown derby cocked on the side of his head. He went in and out of a half-dozen saloons, buying a glass of beer in only one of them, always listening—for a laugh, a low-pitched laugh.

BUSINESS was slow at this hour, so he passed up the saloons and had a haircut and shave. Then he found a small restaurant on a side street and went inside for his lunch. He was sitting at a corner table when a hard-faced man came through the door and headed straight for his table.

There were only a few customers in the lunch-room, the nearest one several tables away. The man approaching Sam wore a tight-fitting checked suit. He had a solid jaw and small, pale blue eyes. Looking at the big, gnarled hands dangling from the sleeves of his coat, Sam knew that the man had once been a professional pugilist. His nose had been broken at the bridge, and there were scars around his eyes.

He sat down opposite Sam and smiled across at him grimly.

"I'm honored," Sam said.

"You'll be dead," the bruiser said, with his twisted grin, "if you ain't out of Tamarack in six hours. There's a stage leaving for Frisco at five this afternoon."

"Why should I leave Tamarack?" Sam asked, in mock surprise. He knew now that he had been spotted coming out of the Palace, and probably had been trailed most of the afternoon.

"We don't like show people in this town," the tough chuckled. "You getting that stage, or must I work on you next time we meet?"

"I think," Sam said softly, "you better work on me, friend, because I am not leaving Tamarack."

He was leaning forward as he spoke, and as the tough started to get up from his chair, jaw thrust out, Sam suddenly shot out his right fist—straight as an arrow into the man's nose.

It was not a heavy punch but, catching the bruiser full on the nose, it brought a yelp from him as it set him down in his chair, blinking, tears coming into his eyes. Just for a moment, though. Then he was coming out of the chair again—when he saw the muzzle of Sad Sam's Colt protruding over the edge of the table.

Where the big Navy Colt had come from was a mystery to the pugilist. He stared at it, gulping a little, trying to think of something to say.

The slight altercation at the corner table had attracted the attention of other diners, but seeing the two men sitting at the table, looking at each other, doing nothing, they lost interest. They could not see Sam's gun, since he was leaning forward slightly, and his back was toward the others in the lunch-room.

"I'd hate to kill a man," Sam said, "for simply threatening me, but I'm told this is a hard town, and who knows but the next time you might have the gun on me."

"Put that damned gun down," the bruiser whispered. The muzzle was now pointing directly at his forehead. Sam had elevated the barrel slightly.

"Get up," Sam said, "and start walking to the door. I'll be two steps behind you. Turn down the alley and head toward the Palace Theatre."

"The Palace?" the ex-pug blinked. "What the hell?"

"I can scatter your brains on the wall behind you," Sad Sam murmured. "You feel like walking, friend?"

The tough got up, moistening his lips. He walked to the door with Sam, following him, the gun out of sight again. All the way to the next intersection, Sam kept several steps behind his captive.

CHAPTER III

"Dance, Boys, Dance!"

DOWN at the corner, Sad Sam heard a sudden roar of sound, then a crowd of miners boiled around the corner, two of them punching viciously at each other. Evidently the fight had started on the main street and the fighters, tearing into each other, had battled around the corner, with the crowd following.

Sam and his pugilist captive were quickly enveloped. One of the fighters backed into Sam, and even as he nimbly jumped clear he saw his pugilist battling his way through the crowd to the street corner. Then he was gone.

Sam stared after him ruefully. By the time he could reach the corner himself, the fellow would already have darted into some alley and lost himself in this sprawling boom town of ten thousand population. Sam's pugilist was as well-hidden as a needle in a haystack. And Sam knew he would have to catch another one if he hoped to find out any of the things he wanted to know.

That afternoon, in a saloon, he saw a man tacking up an announcement of a show at the Palace. His name was on the list of entertainers. Young Spalding evidently had engaged some local talent, as well as a few professionals like Sad Sam, and was putting on a show. The ink on the poster was still wet. Spalding had rushed things.

The poster also announced that the Hardwick troupe of Shakespearean players from Boston would appear in *Hamlet* the following week.

Sam was reading all this, standing at the edge of the crowd, when he heard a man's low laugh. And it registered. Intently he scanned the faces of the people gathered around the poster, but also he was remembering that the road agent who had spoken to him—and laughed—had been on the tall side.

There were several tall men in the group, and Sam edged around the crowd to listen to each of them, until finally he paused behind a man with a shock of unruly blond hair. He heard this man speak, then laugh—and he knew he was standing behind the road agent who had stopped the Crescent City-Tamarack stage!

Sam strolled over to the bar, ordered a drink, and stood leaning on the mahogany, toying with his glass and humming softly as he watched the big blond man. The fellow had bleached eyebrows, shifty blue eyes, and a rather small mouth.

The blond man undoubtedly recognized him, and several times glanced surreptitiously in his direction as he talked with two other men. Sam took no notice of him until the man strolled up to the bar alone. Then, picking up his glass, Sam strolled down along the bar and stopped beside the blond man. The two were out of hearing of anyone else.

Sam said softly, "How does your head feel, friend?"

The man gulped, and nearly choked on the beer he had been drinking. He muttered, plain fright in his eyes, "What in hell do you mean?"

Sam picked up his glass and studied the amber liquor. He said, "In half an hour I can get five people who rode that stage, to identify your voice. And I hear this town is pretty tough on road agents."

"You're crazy," the man mumbled, but his face paled.

"I'll make a deal." Sad Sam smiled. "Tell me who sent you out there last night, and you can ride out of this town a free man."

"You're crazy!" the blond man repeated.

"We'll see," Sad Sam observed, "if Sheriff Morgan thinks I'm crazy."

The man hesitated, then said, "How the hell do I know you won't turn me in anyhow?"

"You'll take my word," Sam said coolly. "You don't have too much choice."

The man said tersely, "Damned if I'll spend five years in state prison! Give me

an hour to get the hell out of here."

Sam said, "I'm interested only in knowing who sent you out."

"George Seymour," the road agent said grimly. "Of the Empire Gambling House."

SAD SAM turned away from him as he said, "I won't see you leaving, friend." He heard the blond man going away fast. When the bartender came up, Sam said, "How does George Seymour do in this town?"

The bartender shrugged. "Has a nice place," he admitted. "But small."

Sam went out and walked along C Street. He found Seymour's Empire two blocks north, wedged in between two larger buildings. It was a long, low, wooden structure with a rickety porch in front of it.

Sam went inside. It was five o'clock in the afternoon now, and the day shift of miners was just coming out of the shafts. The Empire was crowded, the faro spreads and the two roulette tables getting a big play. So was the small bar at one end of the room, and the card tables squeezed along the walls. A pall of tobacco smoke hung in the air.

At the bar, Sam asked casually, "Mr. Seymour in?"

The bartender shook his head. Sam said to him, looking around, "You're kind of crowded in here, friend."

The man growled, "How in hell can you help that in this town? We should have a bigger place, but there's nothing for sale, and there's no place to build on C Street where all the trade is."

Sam nodded sympathetically. "So Mr. Seymour is planning to move at the first opportunity?"

The bartender grinned. He said softly, "You put George Seymour in a big establishment and he'll make a million."

Sam went out, to take a better look at the Palace. Bolton Fifer must have built the theatre when lots were fairly cheap and the center of town was farther to the north. Now the Palace was in the very heart of Tamarack.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor of the theatre, Sam found Polly Fifer and young Spalding in animated conversation in the outer office. From the inner office he heard Fifer's peculiar wheezing voice, and that of another man—a voice with a metallic ring—speaking calmly, quietly.

Sam said, "So you decided to put on a show tonight."

Jack Spalding nodded grimly. "We had to. We need ready cash as a guarantee for the Hardwick players. They're asking a thousand dollars in advance, and Mr. Fifer hasn't got a thousand in cash."

Sam said, "You think that by putting on a few shows you can raise the money?"

"If the shows aren't stopped," Polly Fifer told him bitterly.

"I found another professional singer in town," Spalding said, "and got four or five others, more or less amateur talent. We'll have a show tonight."

Bolton Fifer came out of his office with a tall, pale man with powdery gray hair. The man had a narrow, bony nose and piercing black eyes. As he glanced at Sam, Sad Sam felt as if a beady-eyed snake had surveyed him.

When the tall, gray-haired man had gone down the stairs to the street, and Bolton Fifer was back in his office, Sam asked casually:

"Who was that?"

Jack Spalding frowned. He said, "George Seymour, gambling house owner."

Sam's blue eyes widened. "Friend of Mr. Fifer's?" he asked.

"They know each other," Spalding explained. "Mr. Fifer occasionally has a game of cards down at the Empire."

Polly Fifer glanced toward the closed door before she said softly, "I'm sure Uncle Bolton has been borrowing from Mr. Seymour. And he doesn't want to tell us about it."

"Evidently," Sam observed, "Mr. Seymour has considerable to lend."

"He appears to do well at the Empire," Jack Spalding said. "Which is more than we can say at the Palace."

Deftly Sad Sam changed the subject.

He said, "I'd like permission to go on first tonight, if it doesn't matter to you."

Spalding shook his head. "We have no preference. You realize, though, that if the toughs are in the audience, attempting to break up the show, they'll start right with you."

"I understand that," Sam said carelessly. . . .

AT EIGHT-THIRTY that night, with the oil lamps lighting up the big stage of the Palace, Sad Sam Bones stepped out from the right wing, made an elegant bow, and walked to the piano.

There was a good crowd, and the miners in it roared, just looking at him. He had a few props—a piano on one side of the stage, a chair, and a small mongrel dog he'd picked up on the street that evening, and which he led onto the stage with an enormous cable around its neck.

The dog was saying, as they made their scratching violently, to the hilarious entrance, "I don't see why you need me in this act."

The miners howled as the dog sat down on the stage and began to scratch for fleas. Sad Sam suddenly began to get itchy himself, watching the animal. Then both were amusement of the audience.

There were loud guffaws from one of the boxes just off the stage. Glancing in that direction, Sam spotted a half-dozen big, rough-looking fellows coming through the red-draped doorway. Two of them carried boxes under their arms, and Sam knew at once that rotten fruit or bad eggs were in those boxes.

Walking toward the piano, he saw Jack Spalding in the wings, staring grimly at the boxes. Sad Sam sat down and played his first number, singing in his plaintive manner. The audience was applauding when a rotten tomato smashed against the piano just to the right of Sam's head.

He looked around sadly. The six toughs were watching him from the box, expressions of complete innocence on their faces. When Sam turned around, another tomato skidded off his left shoulder. He could see young Spalding about to come on the stage, his face white with anger.

Quietly Sam lifted a finger to him, his back toward the box. He slid off the piano stool, motioned to the musicians in the pit below, and when they began to play the pre-arranged tune, he went into one of his soft-shoe dances.

He danced seriously, but gradually edging closer to the box at the other side of the stage. When the music stopped and he was less than ten feet from the box, he bowed, did a queer little step, spun around completely, and finished facing the box, a heavy Navy Colt in his hand.

The big gun roared. A .45-caliber slug smashed a big, overripe tomato in the hand of one of the toughs in the box. The slug ripped between his fingers or he would have lost one of them.

Sam Bones stared at the man who had half-risen with the tomato in his hand. Stunned surprise was on the tough's face as unconsciously he still held his hand aloft, with tomato juice streaming down his coat sleeve. Sam watched him coolly, the gun steady in his right hand.

He said softly, "Boys, I presume you didn't like my little dance. Would you oblige the audience by stepping on the stage and trying to entertain them yourselves?"

Somebody in the audience laughed, then the miners began to clap.

One of the toughs growled, "Hell with you!"

Sad Sam shot the man's hat from his head. He said, "Boys, the show must go on. Step down now."

They hesitated, looking at each other, red faced, uncertain. Then the man who had lost his hat put one leg over the ledge of the box and stepped down onto the stage, looking foolish. The others followed, and Sam lined them up in the center of the stage. He signaled the musicians to strike up a tune.

He said, "Dance, boys, dance."

None of them moved until he put two more slugs through the stage floor directly in front of them. Then they began a crude, uncertain hop-skip, each out of step with

his neighbor.

The miners roared and rolled in the aisles as Sam stood to one side, watching, the big gun loose in his right hand. The mongrel dog began to bark at them and nip at the heels of the "dancers", which added to the pandemonium.

POLLY FIFER and Jack Spalding stood in the wings, watching Sam, faces wreathed in big grins. Even Bolton Fifer, out in front, was doubled up with laughter.

When the music stopped and Sam indicated that the "turn" was over, he politely asked the performers to march down the aisle to the rear door. He bowed to the audience then, sang a few more songs, told his stories, and letf the stage. The audience gave him a tremendous ovation.

Jack Spalding gripped his hand, said quietly, "I'm afraid I underestimated you, Mr. Bones."

"I thought for a moment," Sam murmured, "that I'd have to kill one of them."

Young Spalding just blinked at him.

The entire evening's entertainment was a success. The talent Jack Spalding had gathered was fairly good, and the miners cheered uproariously when the curtain went down at eleven o'clock.

Sad Sam said quietly to Bolton Fifer and Jack Spalding, "Now if nothing happens to the Hardwick troupe you should be able to put the Palace back on its feet in weeks."

"If nothing happens," Spalding said soberly. "If everyone else who was to play at the Palace has been kept out of Tamarack, surely an attempt to stop the Hardwick players will be made. "

Bolton Fifer scowled. "We must insist that the stage company have a special armed guard accompanying the coaches from Denver."

Spalding shook his head. "They would laugh off any suggestion that a coach or two full of Shakespearean actors and actresses was in special danger from road agents. If they gave a special guard for our coaches every passenger on the run would insist on the same precautions being taken for them."

Sad Sam nodded. "Anything done," he said, "you will have to do yourself."

Fifer wiped his bald head with a handkerchief and looked flustered. As Sad Sam walked with the theatre owner up to his office on the second floor, he saw Jack Spalding going away with Polly Fifer. Both of them were speaking in low tones.

CHAPTER IV

Little Man With a Big Gun

UP IN his office, Bolton Fifer got out a bottle of wine and two glasses. He'd invited Sam up for a drink, to show appreciation of Sam's having saved the show.

Watching Fifer pour the wine, Sam asked quietly, "Your niece going to marry Spalding, Mr. Fifer?"

The fat man nodded, eyes brightening. "A fine boy," he said. "Played in a traveling show here a year ago—a promising young actor. Met Polly and decided to stay in Tamarack. He's invaluable to me, sir, invaluable."

"They'd like to get married," Sam said, "but young Spalding is waiting until he sees a future for himself?"

Fifer frowned at the glass in his hand. "There is a future for both of them at the Palace—if the Palace lives."

"How much do you owe George Seymour?" Sad Sam asked abruptly.

"I fail to see— "Fifer began, then shrugged. "Five thousand dollars, Mr. Bones. George has always been ready with cash to help me over difficulties."

"Why?" Sam asked. "Did you give him your notes?"

"I did," the fat man said stiffly. "They were strictly business transactions. My theatre is my collateral."

"You could have got cash from the bank," Sam observed, "with your theatre building behind you."

"My attorney, Mr. West," Fifer said, "seemed to think that it would not be good policy for me to let the town know I was nearly bankrupt. He suggested I ask Mr. Seymour for a private loan."

"Mr. West," Sad Sam said slowly, "vouches for George Seymour?"

"Mr. Seymour," Fifer said with dignity, "has an excellent reputation in Tamarack."

Sam smiled. "I'm sure he has."

They drank a toast to the future of the Palace, then Sam left and went out into the noisy, crowded street.

At this hour in the evening Tamarack was booming. Every saloon and gambling house along C Street was jammed to the doors, with no room at the bars, and every card table filled. Drunks stumbled along the boardwalks, bumping into wooden pillars holding up the awnings. Outside of each establishment a barker's strident voice invited patrons inside.

Carefully Sam picked his way through the crowd, a small, polite man who attracted no attention. Occasionally, when his path was blocked by the milling mob, an unseen dog would growl and snarl, and when the crowd split up nervously, Sam passed on, tipping his hat.

He passed in front of the Empire, saw that the gambling house was so packed that men literally had to push their way from faro table to card table. The bar was jammed three deep. The keno man was repeating his numbers in a monotonous voice; there was the whir of the roulette wheel, a high sound against the rising and falling murmur of human voices.

Sam walked around the block to the back of the building. The street here was comparatively quiet, given over mostly to homes of miners and their families.

There was a door at the rear of the building, and three wooden steps leading up from the street. A patch of yellow light from a window lay across the walk. The blind of this window was only half-drawn so, standing on the lower step, Sam could look into a cubby-hole of a room, opening onto the main gambling room.

George Seymour sat near the window, a bottle and two glasses on a table before him, smoke curling from a black cigar on an ash tray at his elbow. On a small couch against the opposite wall sat Jason West, Tamarack attorney. He was smiling, revealing yellowed teeth. His thin, brown hair was combed flat against his enormous skull. He rubbed his long, flexible fingers together as he spoke, his intense blue eyes glued on Seymour.

Sam grasped the door knob, expecting to find the door locked, but to his surprise it opened. He stepped inside, blinking in the light.

Seymour spun around. He snapped, "What the hell is this?"

SAM stood twirling his derby hat, looking from Seymour to the astonished Jason West. He said softly, "Unofficially, gentlemen, I am representing the Palace Theatre tonight."

"You walk in like that again," Seymour grated, "and they'll carry you out on a board."

Ignoring that, Sam said, "How much are you offering for the Palace?"

That caught George Seymour off-guard for one brief moment. He flashed West a quick, comprehensive glance, then snapped, "Who said we were interested in the Palace?"

Sam shrugged. "When a man pays road agents to hold up stagecoaches and threaten theatrical people with their lives unless they turn around and head the other way, what else can you think?"

Seymour was smiling now, grimly, and Jason West, a cigar in his fingers, was watching Sam through a haze of blue smoke.

Seymour said, "Fifer send you?"

Sam said innocently, "Mr. Fifer thinks you are an honest, respectable gambler, and has the utmost confidence in his lawyer, Mr. West. On both counts Mr. Fifer is completely wrong."

"What are we?" West asked, grinning.

"You," Sam told him, "are a cheap, conniving crook who is working with Seymour to steal Mr. Fifer's theatre from him, and undoubtedly for a fat fee." He turned to the astounded gambler. "Mr. Seymour

here wants to open the biggest gambling den in the West, and the Palace is the only building in town large enough to house all the crooked devices he will install to rob the public."

Seymour purred, "I have the money. Why don't I buy my lot and put up a building?"

Sam smiled. "Nothing can buy a foot of property along C Street where you want your house. Because you know that in ten years you can be a millionaire."

"So?" Seymour murmured.

"So far," Sam said. "you have only been a trifle rough with Mr. Fifer's talent. There has been no bloodshed. I am wondering how far you are prepared to go in order to take over the Palace."

The expression in George Seymour's slitted eyes was his answer. There was no extreme to which the man would not go, for the money he was making in the Empire had only whetted his appetite for wealth. The Empire drew greasy silver dollars from the sweaty, calloused palms of poor miners. With the Palace an ornate gambling house, operators, silver magnates, plungers with real money would be attracted.

George Seymour said meaningly, "You are a curious man, friend. You will not live long in this town." He raised his hand to yank on a string dangling above the table before which he sat.

A big, heavy-set man came in from the gambling room. He wore a black derby, and his dark suit threatened to break out at the seams. Sam recognized him as a bouncer he'd seen here earlier.

Seymour said quietly, "Abe, throw this bum out."

Abe cracked his knuckles, and a gleam came into his brutish green eyes. He started across the room, grinning broadly, a man who thoroughly enjoyed his work.

Sam had been standing near the table, his hands resting lightly on the top of a chair back. Without looking at Abe, he suddenly spun the chair directly under the big bouncer's feet.

Abe stumbled over it, cursing as he fell to the floor. Before his fall was completed, Sad Sam had scooped up the liquor bottle from the table and cracked it over the big man's skull. The bottle broke, and the liquor spilled over Abe's face. He lay on the floor, his hands twitching.

Carefully Sam replaced the top half of the bottle back on the table. He was adjusting his red suspenders when he saw George Seymour's hands drop to a drawer in the table. In the next breath the gambler was looking into the big muzzle of a Navy Colt.

Seymour smiled coolly, his fingers relaxed, and he said, "A small man with a big gun. A bad combination."

Jason West said from the couch, "But not impregnable."

Sad Sam nodded. "That remains to be seen, gentlemen. I wouldn't like anything to happen to Mr. Fifer or young Spalding. If it does, I'm afraid I'll have to come back here."

HE SAW the swift glance which Jason West directed at George Seymour as he backed toward the door and opened it.

Seymour said grimly, "No man around here is big enough to threaten me. I'll run you out of this town on your hands and knees, little man."

Sam smiled coldly. "Good evening, gentlemen," he said, and backed through the door.

Walking around the block he came back to C Street and stood on the corner counting the saloons and gambling houses in sight from his one vantage point. There were eighteen saloons and seven gambling dens, three dance halls and several more which combined the three vices. Thousands of people moved along here in the bright lights, overflowing into the road, obstructing carriages and riders trying to push through the throng. All grist for the deadfall mills.

Earlier in the evening Sam had smelled rain in the air—the fall rain which sometimes came to this high country. He had not thought of it again until now when a raindrop struck his nose, tickling it. He looked up into the black sky, then walked

on down C Street in the direction of the Palace Theatre.

He was thinking of that look which had passed between Seymour and West when he'd mentioned that he didn't want any harm to come to Fifer or Spalding. He'd had an uncanny feeling then that they had already made plans concerning the two men, and that his remark had startled them, catching them by surprise, as if he had read their minds.

As he made his way through the packed street, rain began to fall. Raindrops sizzled against the kerosene flares outside the various establishments. They hissed and spattered into the dust of the road.

Sam Bones turned into the doorway of the Palace and again went up the stairs to Fifer's office. He found the fat man going over his accounts. He was alone.

Sam said quietly. "Jack Spalding figure on doing anything to safeguard those coaches bringing the Hardwick troupe from Denver?"

Bolton Fifer sat back in his chair and slowly nodded. "He's worked out a plan," he admitted. "Jack's leaving right now for Boulder. He's taking enough money to hire an armed guard to accompany the coaches. We're paying for it so the stage company won't be obligated, even if they would consent to furnish guards."

"Where is Boulder?" Sam wanted to know.

"Eighteen miles east of here," Fifer explained. "We figure that if we *are* hit, the holdup crew will jump the stages somewhere between Boulder and Tamarack. If we can get the troupe here without any trouble and get the show started, we can hire our own toughs here to protect them." He laughed. "You showed us how it could be done, Mr. Bones."

Sam was thoughtful as he listened to the rain on the windows. Wind was coming up now also, driving the rain before it. He could hear the confusion in the street below as men raced for cover. Open carriages caught in the quick storm were battling to get under sheds or into barns.

"In this weather," Fifer went on, "nobody will see Jack slip out of town. He'll have a wet ride, but it will be a safe one."

"He just leave, you say?" Sam asked.

"Just before you came in," Fifer said. "He's going to hire a horse over at Shannon's stables." He looked at Sam queerly. "Why? Anything wrong?"

"I don't know yet," Sam said. "But take my advice. Don't trust Seymour, and don't trust Jason West."

The cigar in Fifer's mouth drooped. He said, in surprise, "Why not, Mr Bones?"

"They're after your theatre," Sam told him tightly. "Seymour needs it to house his new gambling establishment—the one he's planning. West is working with him, probably for a big commission if he can take the building away from you."

"But—but," Fifer spluttered, "Seymour *has* a building. He's making money—"

SAM shook his head. "Not the kind of money he'll make with your Palace converted to a two-story gambling house, the biggest in the West. Seymour will be able to set himself up as the biggest gambling house operator in the country. He can't buy property on C Street for love or money, and he knows it. So he's been after you for a long time, trying to discourage you from putting on shows, so you'll go broke and have to sell out."

"Then *he's* been behind the intimidation of my actors!" Bolton Fifer half-whispered. "All the while he's been lending me money, pretending to be my friend."

"He's made sure he got your notes," Sam pointed out. "If you go into bankruptcy he takes the building."

Fifer banged a fat fist on the desk. "Once we get the Hardwick troupe here," he declared, "I'll make enough to pay off Seymour's notes. I'll get back on my feet and fight him every inch of the way!"

"The Hardwick troupe isn't here yet," Sam observed drily, as he got up to leave.

Down on the street again, he saw crowds of men standing on porches and under awnings as sheets of rain were being driven down C Street. Keeping close to buildings as much as possible, Sam made his way to Fremont Street where Shannon's livery was located. He

saw the sign over the alley entrance, though all the streets were almost black dark now, the rain having doused the kerosene flares. Here and there, under awnings, however, smaller flares burned, the red glow flickering on wet wood and muddied road.

Stepping into the embrasure of a doorway, Sam watched the livery reflectively. He didn't think Seymour had as yet taken any action to stop Jack Spalding, but the young man was Bolton Fifer's mainstay, and the moment Spalding was out of the way Fifer and the Palace would crash.

CHAPTED V

Chore Finished

A RIDER was coming out of the alley as Sam Bones watched there, head down against the rain, water trickling from his derby hat. At the rider passed under the archway through a bar of yellow light from a window, Sam recognized Jack Spalding. Evidently Jack had taken his time, saying good-by to Polly.

Spalding didn't turn into C Street, to take the main road out of town, but rode slowly along Fremonte, probably intending to take a back way until some distance out of town, then cut across to the highway.

Sam Bones stepped out of the doorway to walk after him, but Jack Spalding had ridden less than twenty-five feet from the livery arch when a shot rang out on Sam's side of the street, about thirty yards ahead of him.

Spalding's horse jumped in alarm and the rider lurched drunkenly in the saddle before he slumped forward on the prancing horse. He made a vain effort to cling to the animal's mane but slid from saddle, landing in the mud, where he lay without moving.

Sad Sam Bones, face grim, slipped the big gun out of his coat and ran down the street. Men had jumped out of a doorway on the livery stable side of the street and were running to Spalding's aid. Sam kept going along his own side until he reached the narrow, six-foot-wide alley from which the shot had come.

Whirling into the alley, he kept running at top speed. He caught a glimpse of a man up ahead of him, vaguely, and could hear boots sloshing through the mud. Lighter on his feet than the man ahead, Sam could make better time; and was gaining rapidly when the fleeing man turned to fire at him.

Sam saw the flare of the gun and swerved toward the wall, but felt the breath of the slug on his cheek as it whined by. He kept going, without firing himself, and saw the running man dart into a doorway. Sam dropped flat on his face, his gun ready, waiting. He held the gun steady on the doorway as he felt the rain soak through his clothing. His derby was pulled low over his eyes as he watched the embrasure without moving a muscle.

When at last he saw movement there, he fired—three shots. He heard a man's hoarse cry, then a heavy body stumbled out of the doorway to fall into the mud of the alley.

Sad Sam got up and moved cautiously forward to the sprawled body. He struck a match, took one look at the face of the man in the mud, and let the match go out. The face he had seen was that of the tough who had accosted him in the restaurant, then slipped away in the crowd when Sam had been trying to take him to the Palace. And the man was dead.

Clicking out empty cartridges, Sam stood in the rain for some time before turning and walking out of the alley. There was little doubt now that Seymour had had Jack Spalding watched all the time. He'd evidently believed Spalding would arrange for an escort for the two stage-coaches expected.

At last Sam hurried back to Fremonte Street. A crowd had gathered around the doorway of the Silver Saloon. A man told him that Jack Spalding had been carried into a back room, and a doctor was attending him.

[Turn to page 98]

man against man-killer!

The giant tiger struck in the dark without warning . . . his hungry jaws meant blood and terror to the Indian village . . . until twenty corpses marked the jungle trail.

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Word had been sent to Bolton Fifer, and almost as soon as Sam stepped into the room where Jack lay, Fifer and his niece hurried in. Polly was crying silently. She dropped down beside the cot on which Jack lay, his face white. He'd been stripped to the waist, and the doctor was just extracting the slug which had gone through the right shoulder.

Sam sighed with relief when the doctor straightened up and said confidently, "He'll be up and around in a few weeks."

BOLTON FIFER'S face was dead-white as he sidled over to Sad Sam. He asked quickly, "You see who shot him?"

"One of Seymour's boys," Sam said. "He's dead now."

Fifer's eyes widened. "It's—it's come to killing!" he muttered, agitated.

"You didn't think Seymour would stop with scaring a few actors, did you?" Sam asked, but he did not mention the danger he knew he was in himself. For Seymour would know who had killed his hired cutthroat, and Seymour would have men looking for Sad Sam Bones before the night was out—if they were not, even now.

"I'll have to go up to Boulder myself," he heard Fifer saying, "and see if I can get enough men to escort those stages here."

Sad Sam looked at him thoughtfully. A man as fat as Bolton Fifer couldn't even ride all the way to Boulder, let alone fight Seymour's gunhands when and if they attacked the stage-coaches.

"Wait till morning," Sam advised. "Bad night to start out on a ride like that."

Fifer said glumly, "What do *you* intend to do tonight?"

"Mainly," Sad Sam said drily, "stay alive."

He went out into the rain again, heading for Jason West's office, though only half-expecting to find the lawyer there. But there was a light in the office, and through the rain-streaked glass he saw West at his desk. He was alone.

Sam slapped some of the water from his derby hat and stepped inside. West was lighting a cigar. He looked at Sam through another haze of blue smoke.

Sam said, "You hear young Spalding was just shot from his horse?"

"News to me." Jason West shrugged.

Sam went on smoothly, "I just shot the boy you had trailing Spalding to gun him down if he tried to leave town."

The lawyer raised his eyebrows. "Why tell me?" he asked. "That's none of my business."

"You're in with Seymour," Sam said, without emotion. "You're as big a crook as he is. You knew Seymour was going to have that boy murdered."

"Nonsense!" Jason West snapped.

"Here's more nonsense," Sam told him. "There's a stage leaving Tamarack in one hour. You be on it, or you'll be dead before this rain stops."

"It'll take more than talk to make me do that," the lawyer chuckled.

"Hot lead could," Sam said, and backed out of the door into the rain again.

He went down the street and in a few minutes was slipping around to the rear door of the Empire for the second time that evening. There was a light in the back room, but Sam didn't go in. He took up a position between a warehouse and a lumberyard fence where he was sheltered from the driving rain.

He leaned against the warehouse wall, hands in his pockets, coat collar pulled up. His suit was baggy and wet, but he had managed to keep the Navy Colt dry inside his coat.

Watching the back door of the Empire, he saw a man go up the steps and enter. The man, tall and thin, could have been Jason West. In ten minutes four men came out and paused for a few moments at the bottom of the steps, before breaking up into pairs and going in different directions.

Two of the men had disappeared around the corner to the south when Sam Bones stepped out of the alley and started to follow the other two. They were walking north toward Grant Street, wholly unaware that they, the hunters, were being followed by the hunted!

Moving up closer behind the two men, Sam saw that one of them, as he thought, was Jason West. The other man, shorter, heavier, probably was one of Seymour's floormen, out for a little extra cash for an exterminating job.

Sam moved diagonally across the street as West and his companion turned the corner and headed toward C Street. Those four men Sam had seen would scour this town until they had spotted him. Then he would be kept in sight until one of them had a chance to open up on him.

GRANT STREET was a narrow side street with one lighted saloon up near the corner of C. The rest of the street was dark. The wind squalls had died down somewhat now, but rain still fell in sheets. Sad Sam slipped his hand inside his coat and grasped the butt of the Colt. The rain drowned out the sound of his footsteps in the street, so he was able to get within twenty feet of the two men ahead of him without being heard. He was about to call to them to stop when a man's voice behind him called sharply:

"Get down, West!"

Sam Bones felt a cold chill stab at his heart. It was the voice of George Seymour, less than fifteen yards behind him. The trap had been neatly sprung. They had guessed he would be watching the back door of the Empire, and Seymour had sent out men as decoys and followed Sam himself when the little man had taken up the chase.

West and his companion lunged to either side of the road, dropping to their knees. They had been directly in line with Sam, and a bullet from Seymour's gun could easily have got one of them.

Sad Sam fell also, rolling toward the wall of a building. Managing to get the Navy Colt clear as he fell, he sent a shot back at Seymour.

The roar of his big gun blended with the boom of Seymour's. The gambling house owner's slug dug into the mud a few feet to Sam's left, but Sam's first shot was high. It was intended only to drive Seymour around the corner.

He heard Seymour yell, "All set, West!" and West and the man with him opened up, laying their shots low, peppering the alley so that nothing could cross it alive. Sad Sam lay on his stomach as the shots came closer, holding the Navy steady, braced against the ground. He held it so that Seymour, behind him, could not target him by the flash.

He fired at the flash of the gun on the right, then sent another shot at the spot from which the flash of the other gun had come. He waited, but there was no return shot. Instead, up the alley a man was staggering around, bumping into the wall. Sam heard a body fall in the mud with a sickening thud. Then Seymour called:

"West, you get him?"

Sad Sam rolled over, facing the other end of the alley. And he had a feeling that Jason West would never answer Seymour in this world.

The street beyond the alley was shrouded in darkness, and the rainfall made vision even more blurred. Instinct had to help Sad Sam.

"West!" Seymour called again.

Sad Sam got to his feet, flattened his small body against the wall, waiting again. Seymour was still around the corner of the alley entrance.

With no answer from West or from the gambling house bouncer with the lawyer, and with Sam also keeping still, Sam was certain that the silence was beginning to weigh heavy on George Seymour's mind. The man could have no idea who was dead and who was still alive in the alley. The gambler might be considering the possibility that West did not want to answer him for fear the sound of his voice might bring another shot. And of course there was also the possibility that Sad Sam was already dead in the alley.

Smiling faintly, Sam edged his way down along the wall in Seymour's direction, the gun braced against his side.

Seymour called for the third time, "Damn it, West, speak up! I've got him covered!"

Sam didn't shoot at the sound of the

voice. Seymour wouldn't be fool enough to call out from the open. Sam kept moving, and was less than five yards from the corner when he lifted his own voice, casting it from a point a few feet to the right.

"I'm coming out, Seymour!"

There was the flash of a gun from the corner before the last word was out of his mouth. Sam shot at the flash, aiming a few inches above it. A man stumbled out from behind the protecting wall of the building, bent low. He fell in the mud.

SAM kept walking. He had almost reached the alley entrance when he heard boots pounding the wooden boardwalk, dying away down the street. The tough from the gambling house who had been with Jason West had had enough.

Sad Sam paused beside Seymour's body. He bent down and rolled the man over. When he straightened up he shoved the Navy Colt back inside his coat. It was no longer needed against George Seymour.

Up at the other end of the alley men were standing in the rain looking down the dark passageway. Sam could see them outlined against the light from a saloon on the opposite corner of the street.

Adjusting his derby hat, Sad Sam Bones turned the corner into the street and walked unhurriedly toward the next side street. He turned up this thoroughfare, heading toward C Street again.

At the corner of C he heard the westbound stage rattling through the rain, coming his way, the side lamps casting a yellowish glow in the mud of the road. As the coach rattled by, he ran from under the protection of a wooden awning where he had huddled for a moment, and climbed into the rear boot. There were some bags there—mail-bags and the traveling bags of passengers.

Settling them carefully, Sad Sam lay down, drawing his knees up, using a softer bag for a pillow. He lay there listening to the whir of the big wheels beneath him and to the sodden clump of horses' hooves in the mud. He hummed a little tune to himself. It was a sad song—a song of men who loved money too well, and who died foolishly because of it.

And then he hummed another little song—a song about another hill, another town, a new adventure.

NO COYOTES, NO GRAIN

ONE of the strangest results of giving bounties for the killing of so-called harmful animals resulted in near-ruin for the farmers of the west a number of years ago. The coyotes were so numerous they were deemed a nuisance. They had killed thousands of dollars' worth of sheep. Their howling was considered an omen of bad luck. They were sneaky and it seemed as if they would live on forever and pester the farmers and sheep raisers. So some of the states offered a good bounty for each coyote pelt brought in.

Farmers and sheep men set out hunting coyotes. They made plenty of bounty money and the coyotes all but vanished. For a very short time the farmers were happy. No more sheep killing, no more weird howling at night! Yes, they were happy—for a short time—but almost immediately the alfalfa fields grew bare, hay fields became like barren wastes, and grain, such as wheat, simply folded up and died.

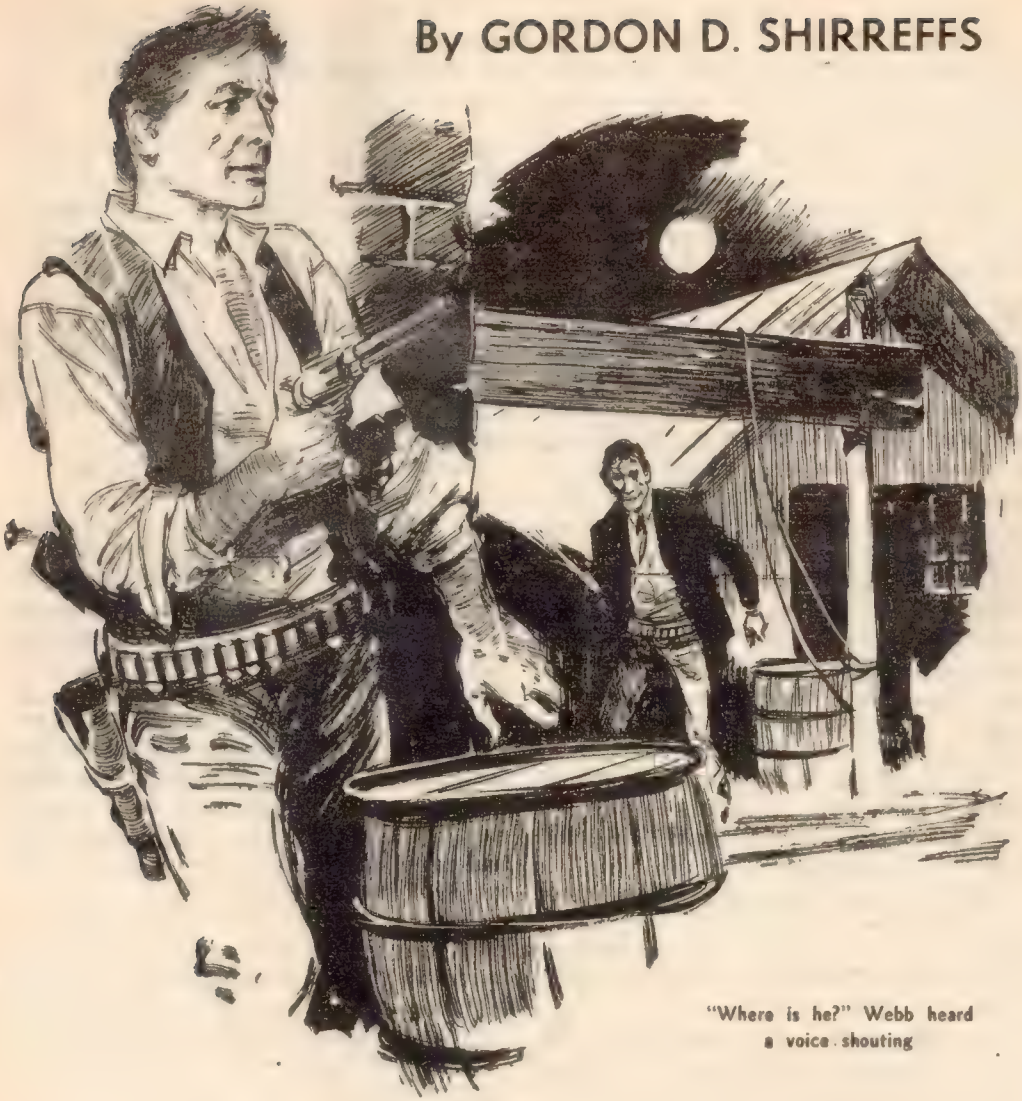
A study by government experts was made. It was found that millions of field mice were having what was literally a "field" day. Undisturbed, they were gnawing at the alfalfa and grain and destroying the crops. The coyotes had been destroying, annually, about fifty thousand dollars' worth of sheep meat but the field mice were ruining millions of dollars' worth of alfalfa and grain.

Why had this not happened before the bounties were offered for the killing of the coyotes? Because those animals, the coyotes, had been killing off the field mice—thousands of them each day. They had really been the protectors of the grain and alfalfa fields.

Almost exactly the same thing occurred, later, in California, when a bounty on coyotes permitted the jack-rabbits to flourish and they, in return, all but wiped out the grain.

—Walter K. Putney

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS



"Where is he?" Webb heard a voice shouting

THE HOLLOW HERO

Webb Scott half figured he would die facing a gunman of Rickabaugh's caliber, but at least he'd die trying . . .

WITH a jingle of trace chains the Concord rolled across the pebbled bed of Dry Wash and rose to the level of Front Street. Moses Farrow, the whip, grinned at Webb Scott, riding shotgun.

"Broke the record again, Webb! Cut

ten minutes this time from Barlow to Placerita here!"

"Yeah, and damned near broke everybody's necks." Webb dropped to the ground as the Concord was braked in front of the Wells Fargo office.

A tall man who had boarded the stage at Barlow got out, doffed his black hat, and helped down the daughter of the town marshal. The girl, Barbara Lacey, smiled at Webb.

"Did Moses break his record, Webb?" she asked.

"By ten minutes." Webb saw the tall man look up at Moses. The man's face was lean and hard, browned by the suns of Arizona. Gambler, thought Webb, glancing at the black frock coat, fine linen shirt and polished boots. "I'll take your luggage over to your father's office," he said to the girl.

He watched Barbara Lacey cross the dusty street to her father's office. She had changed in the two years she had been at school in California. She was no longer the long-legged tomboy who had ridden many a time with Webb.

"You there, on the box!" The tall man was eying Moses.

Moses dropped to the ground. "Yes, sir? What can I do for you?"

The man eyed him coldly. "You shook us around like dice in a cup."

Moses tugged at his sandy mustache. "That road ain't exactly the Camino Real," he said.

The man leaned forward, flicked his leather gloves across Moses's face. "Let this be a lesson to you to drive more carefully." He stepped back, waited for Moses to make a move.

"Why, damn you!" Moses drew back his whip.

The man thrust his hand under his coat. "Go ahead," he said coldly. "Try hitting me with that thing."

Webb stepped in between them. "Moses was wrong," he said. "But you had no call to hit him."

"Maybe you'd like some of the same treatment?" the man asked, as people stopped to watch.

Webb smiled. "Don't try it, mister. I'm deputy marshal here as well as shotgun messenger. We don't like gunplay in Placerita."

THE man glanced down at Webb's walnut-handled Colt. He smiled, but his eyes were the coldest gray Webb had ever seen. "What's your name, sir?" he asked quietly.

"Webb Scott."

The man nodded. "I'll remember that. My name is Bart Rickabaugh." He turned and strode off.

Moses whistled softly. "Bart Rickabaugh!"

Webb remembered then. He had been a kid when Bart Rickabaugh had cut a swath of violence in Arizona. Nine men had died under his flaming Colts before he was twenty-two, and that had been twenty years before. The last he'd heard of the gambler was that he'd been sent to Yuma for twenty years.

Rickabaugh, of the notorious fight in the Silver Belle in Tucson. Rickabaugh, who had killed the two gunslinging Porter brothers in Tombstone. Rickabaugh, who had been shot through the back by Tiburcio Padilla, the Mexican tough, and who had got to his feet to kill the badman with one shot from a hideout gun.

Placerita was in for a time if Rickabaugh was still a gamecock. And it didn't appear as though twenty years in the pen had changed him.

"Rickabaugh!" a bystander said in a hushed voice. Bart Rickbaugh was an Arizona legend.

Webb took the locked cash pouch into the Wells Fargo office and got a signed receipt from Sam Cass, the agent. Sam eyed Webb.

"That was Bart Rickabaugh, wasn't it?" he asked.

Webb shrugged. "As far as I'm concerned Rickabaugh is just another tinhorn, Sam."

"Watch yourself with Rickabaugh, Webb. I saw him tangle with one of the Earp brothers once. Slapped his face right on Toughnut Street in Tombstone."

"I'll bet it wasn't Virgil or Wyatt."

"Well, anyways the Earp brothers left him alone. Ain't many men could say that."

"You don't argue with a mad dog," Webb said, left the office, and took Barbara's luggage to the marshal's office. Barbara was talking to her father.

"Ain't *she* the lady!" asked Tim Lacey.

Webb nodded. "I hardly knew her when she came up to me in Barlow," he said.

The faint fragrance of lilac came to him. She looked more like her mother than ever, and Mary Lacey had been the local belle before Tim Lacey had married her. Hazel eyes, soft lips, and skin as smooth as a baby's.

Barbara stood up. "You're dining with us tonight, aren't you, Webb?"

Tim grinned. "She means come to supper, Webb."

Barbara kissed him. "You old mossy-horn," she said. "Come to supper then, Webb."

When she left the office with a swish of her modish traveling suit, Tim went to the window to watch her. "Her mother come to life," he said quietly. "Never could figure why Mary married an hombre like me, Webb."

Webb sat down and lit a cigar. "Bart Rickabaugh is in town, Tim."

Tim turned quickly. "What?"

"Rode in with us from Barlow."

Tim said, "You sound like something happened. Did he make a play for Barbara?"

"Not that I could see."

Tim said, "He always played the gentleman when he wasn't busy killing somebody."

"He slapped Moses Farrow's face for giving him a rough ride."

"What'd Moses do?"

"I got between them," said Webb. "Rickabaugh didn't like it much."

"Things have been quiet in Placerita for over a year now," Tim sighed. "I thought we had this town by the tail. Now Rickabaugh. He's a hardcase, Webb. All horns and rattle."

"He might not stay."

Tim leaned back in his chair. "No. But if he does, there might be gunplay, Webb. I'm getting a little too old for that kind of work."

"I'm here, Tim."

Tim shook his head. "You're handy with a sixgun, Webb. Ain't many men can shoot as good as you, but as for draw, if Rickabaugh still has half his speed, he can beat you. No offense, Webb."

"He can't outdraw a ten-gauge sawed-off Greener with split wads."

"*If* you get a chance to use it."

"I don't intend to run from him," Webb said quietly.

"I know you don't, son," and, as Webb went to the door, the marshal called, "He used to carry a short-barreled Colt in a leather-lined hip pocket, Webb. Never used a holster. Pretty damned good with a derringer, too. Sometimes kept it in his sleeve, sometimes a vest pocket, once in his hat. He's like a damned sidewinder."

WEBB nodded, walked out, and went slowly up Front Street.

Placerita had been a boom town when Webb had been a kid. The mines had petered out, and the town had showed signs of dying until cattlemen had filled the huge San Rita Valley with good cattle. Placerita had good water, a strategic location, was on the road to the new town of Phoenix, and was staid and prosperous. Though bullet-holes still pocked the walls of the older buildings.

Boot hill loomed to the north of the town. Webb looked up at it. It was weed-grown now. The new cemetery was farther out in a pleasant grove, but Webb still had a memory of the ornate black hearse with its nodding plumes, taking the bodies of men who had died in flashing gunplay up to the barren boot hill. His own father, Pete Scott, had lain up there until he had been removed to the new cemetery. Webb's father had been sheriff until a crazed gunslinger had cut him down in a dark alley.

Webb turned in at the Miner's Rest. The long bar was lined with men. Bart Rick-

abaugh was standing at the far end, drinking a sherry flip.

"I'm a lawyer now," Webb heard him telling two men who were listening to him. "Passed my examinations last week in Phoenix. I'm thinking of practicing in a good town."

Sim Forest, one of the listening men, said, "Placerita has room for you, Mr. Rickabaugh. Only have two lawyers now —old man Martin and his son, Andy."

The other man, Charley Good, another bar fly, glanced at Webb.

"Webb Scott there has been studying under old man Martin to practice law. That right, Webb?"

Webb nodded. Rickabaugh's eyes met his.

Charley Good said, "Webb is one of the hardest working hombres in town, Mr. Rickabaugh. Deputy marshal, shotgun messenger, and law student!"

"We've met," Rickabaugh said quietly.

Good downed his drink. "I hear Barbara Lacey is back, Webb. You still honing for her?"

Webb fingered his glass. Charley always ran off at the mouth. Charley laughed. "I reckon I got my answer," he said.

Sim Forest remarked cordially, "Well, you're plumb welcome in Placerita, Mr. Rickabaugh. Damned town's dying on its feet for lack of excitement."

"I don't intend to start any," said Rickabaugh.

There was an uneasy tension in the place, caused by the presence of that lean gambler at the end of the bar. There were men here who looked on a man like that as a hero, to be curried to.

The barkeep slid Rickabaugh's drink in front of him, slopping some over the side. Rickabaugh said, "Make me another. And be more careful."

The barkeep flushed. "I will like hell!"

Silence fell. The soft slap of cards stopped. A man coughed nervously. Rickabaugh gripped the edge of the bar.

"You do as I say," he ordered.

Charley Good waggled a hand. "Take it easy, Mr. Rickabaugh. Joe didn't mean any harm."

"Shut up," said Rickabaugh.

Men glanced at Webb. Rickabaugh's hard eyes studied him. Tim's words came back to Webb, and a trickle of sweat ran down the deputy's sides. There was a cold hostility in Rickabaugh, and Webb knew it was not directed at the barkeep. It was meant for him.

Rickabaugh threw his glass behind the bar. "When a gentleman asks for a drink," he said, "he wants it served correctly."

Joe said to Webb, "This man is looking for trouble, Marshal. I ain't serving him any more."

Webb had learned one thing from Tim Lacey he had never learned from his father. Old Pete Scott would have walked down to the end of the bar and settled the matter then and there. Tim Lacey would have waited for his chance, for he was a man who gauged them, and decided when would be the most advantageous time to make his move.

"Well?" Joe asked Webb.

"Give him his drink," Webb said quietly, and stepped back from the bar, Rickabaugh's eyes never leaving him.

As he pushed through the batwings he knew that Rickabaugh's thin smile followed him. He heard a man laugh, and felt ashamed. But it was worst of all to know that Rickabaugh had bluffed him.

SCRUBBED and polished, wearing his good suit, Webb showed up at the Lacey cottage that night. Barbara was wearing a neat gingham apron over her house frock. Her face was flushed from the heat of the stove.

"Sit down with Dad for awhile," she said. "We'll eat in about twenty minutes."

Webb couldn't take his eyes from her. It didn't seem possible that freckle-faced Barbara had become the poised young woman before him.

"Steak and apple pie, Webb," she said, as she turned away. "I hope you have a good appetite."

Tim Lacey was sitting in the back yard beneath one of the few fruit trees in Placerita. "Set, Webb," he said. "I hear you had a run-in with Rickabaugh after

you left the office."

"Charley Good has been at work," Webb said drily.

"Oh, you know Charley. Said Rickabaugh faced you down."

"It wasn't as bad as that, Tim," Webb said defensively.

Tim rubbed his jaw. "No? Well, don't go forgetting it's your job to keep order in Placerita, son."

"You mean I haven't then?" Webb blurted.

"Now don't get riled! You know as damned well as I do that Rickabaugh will try to run this town. That's his way. It's a bad start you've made with him, Webb. A fine start for him."

"Maybe you would have done better?"

Tim flushed. "Now don't get smart with me, Webb. I raised you from a pup after your pa passed on. I can say these things to you."

Webb unpinned his badge and held it out to the marshal. "Maybe you'd like to pin this on someone else," he said quietly.

Tim Lacey stood up. "What in hell's wrong with you, boy, anyway?" he demanded.

"I've stood enough today, Tim. I won't stand any more."

Tim looked down at the badge. "Pin it back on," he said. "You're not on trial with me, son." He felt in his pocket for a cigar. "Mmm! I hear Rickabaugh plans to practice law here in town."

"I heard something about that, too," Webb murmured.

The marshal lit his cigar. He looked at his deputy over the sulphurous burst of his match. "Listen, Webb. No matter what happens, you stick it out."

"You're sure long on advice tonight, Tim."

"Maybe you're too damned ornery to listen to it."

Webb turned on a heel. "Skip the supper tonight, Tim. I've got things to do." He walked past the house and back toward town. . . .

Early the next morning, Webb took the southward run as shotgun messenger, replacing Phil Hunt, who was not well. He laid over in Barlow and did not reach Placerita until late in the afternoon the next day. Sam Cass eyed him curiously as he placed the cash pouch on the counter.

"Things have been happening, Webb," he informed.

"So?" Webb lifted a shoulder.

Sam shoved a copy of the *Placerita Press* over to him, placing a finger on an item. Webb read:

> Among the leading citizens of Cochise County, now residing in Placerita, is Mr. Barton E. Rickabaugh, member of the Arizona bar. Mr. Rickabaugh has opened an office in the Dell House.
>
> In his younger days Mr. Rickabaugh was as wild as the country in which he was raised, but the years have changed him into a peaceable businessman who wants to serve the citizens of Placerita in his legal capacity. In those days he was often victimized by certain men, to further their notorious reputations. But he survived such attacks successfully. He is now a modest, friendly man who has the reputation of being easy to get along with, providing his honor is not sullied.

Sam grinned. "That's one of the finest paid personals I've ever read! Did you ever see the like of it?"

"He's swinging a wide loop," Webb said drily.

Sam laughed. "In more ways than one. He's been sparking Barbara Lacey. Had dinner with the Laceys last night. Better watch out, Webb."

When Webb reached the marshal's office, Tim was sitting behind the desk, puffing on a cigar. "Howdy, Webb. Didn't know you were going out on the stage to Barlow."

"Phil Hunt was sick. I took his place."

Tim's wise old eye held his. "That the real reason, Webb?"

"It's as good as any."

"I reckon so. Barbara was mighty put out about you walking off the other night, Webb."

"I'm sorry.— Any trouble in town?"

"If you mean Rickabaugh, no. Looks like he's decided to settle here. I reckon you saw what was in the paper about him, didn't you?"

"Sam showed it to me," Webb said briefly.

TIM folded his hands in front of him and didn't look up as he said, "He's been over to see Barbara. Acted real nice. He's not just a gunslinger, Webb. He's got a damned good mind. Would of done you good to hear him and Barbara talking about poetry and such-like. He told us he studied all the time he was in Yuma. Literature, history, philosophy, and law."

"Did it change his character?" asked Webb.

"You've got your mind plumb made up about Rickabaugh, ain't you?" growled the marshal. "And nothing's going to change it."

Webb shrugged. "Well, I'll be getting along. Do you want me on duty tonight?"

"No. You can take over in the morning. Have the evening with your law books."

Young Andy Martin was working in the law office when Webb came in. "Dad is out of town, Webb," he said. "Can I help you tonight?"

"You sure can," said Webb heartily.

Andy Martin, despite having been crippled as a boy by a runaway team, had studied under his father, then had gone away to law school. He had now taken over most of his father's business, and Webb believed the old man wanted him, Webb, to be Andy's partner when the old man retired.

Andy looked up at Webb. "Bart Rickabaugh has opened up a law office, Webb."

"So I hear."

"There's enough business here for two law offices. One thing bothers me, though. You remember that case concerning Ab Holden and Ross Dodge?"

"The water rights case? I thought Ab had that sewed up."

Andy shook his head. "We did have it almost settled until Bart Rickabaugh was retained by Ross Dodge."

"Hell! Ab owns that water hole. Everybody knows that. What can Rickabaugh do?"

Andy shrugged. "He claims the water hole is common to both properties."

"Why, Ab settled on that ranch ten years ago, and it took in the water hole!" Webb insisted. "Ross didn't even buy the land next to Ab's until two years ago. Ross didn't have a leg to stand on."

Andy said, "Of course he didn't. Ab had agreed to let him use the water hole at certain times in order to settle the argument out of court. And now this Rickabaugh has horned in. He was in here this morning, blustering."

"What did he say?"

"Well, he claims Ab agreed to let Ross use the water hole whenever he liked, that Ab has another spring and another water hole on his ranch, so Ross should be allowed to use this one full time. Declares that's Ab's agreement."

"So Ab would have to move half his herd clear down to the Peloncillo Hills if he did that!"

Andy's pale face flushed. "Rickabaugh got pretty rough about it. He's anxious to win his first case here to impress people. He thinks he can bluff Dad and me so we'll back down. But he can't."

Webb glanced at the leather-bound volumes lining the walls of the office. He liked working there. He liked the law, the feeling of men meeting each other in fairness and beyond violence. But Rickabaugh had changed that, too.

He said, "I wish I could pass my bar examination, Andy. I'd fight Rickabaugh on this to a stand-still."

Andy looked up quickly. "You think we'll let that ex-gunslinger bluff us? When we know that's exactly what he's trying to do? You should know us better than that, Webb."

Webb slapped the thin shoulder of the young lawyer. "I know you won't back down. Just be careful. Rickabaugh has a course to run in this town. I hope no one is killed before he does run it."

Andy stood up. "He hasn't exactly made you his friend, has he?" He paused, and finally said hesitantly, "I understand Barbara Lacey has been seeing him."

"She has a right to pick her own friends," Webb said, his voice cold, and a little stiff.

"That's so." Andy filled his pipe, thoughtfully. After another moment he said, "You know, Webb, you've always

been like a brother to me. I can remember you battling Eddie Danby years ago when he called me Leg-and-a-Half. You handed him one hell of a beating for that. You were always championing me."

Webb smiled, and said cheerfully, "You were holding your own that day, as I remember. You took a beating yourself before I stepped in."

Andy, busy lighting his pipe, didn't look at Webb as he said, "I'm mighty sorry to see you lose out with Barbara. You two always seemed so well-matched."

"I don't think I've lost out with her, Andy," Webb said quietly. "No offense." Andy studied him. "Don't let him bluff *you*, Webb."

The deputy reached for the door knob. "I can take care of myself."

"I thought you wanted to work tonight," Andy said, surprised.

"Some other time, Andy." Webb left the office. He glanced back as he walked up the street. Andy was watching him from the window.

Barbara Lacey was sitting on the cottage veranda when Webb opened the gate. She wore a black lace reboso over her shoulders. She smiled as Webb reached her.

"Over your temper, Webb?"

He took off his hat. "I came to apologize."

"Dad has ways of putting things bluntly," she said. "I don't believe he meant to make you mad."

"I've been more worried about what you thought of me," he murmured.

"We overlook the mistakes of those we like, Webb," she told him, and after a moment he said, "I thought perhaps you'd like to go to the church social with me tonight."

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry. Someone else has already asked me."

Webb looked at her quickly. "Bart?"

"Yes."

Rickabaugh was coming toward the cottage through the shadows even then. Webb said, "I'll come back some other time."

[*Turn page*]

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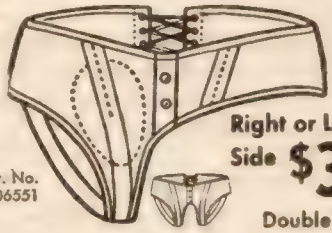

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Outside the gate he met Rickabaugh, who held up a hand. "I want to talk to you, Scott."

"Yes?" Webb halted.

"Were you at the Lacey cottage on business?"

"No."

Rickabaugh nodded. "I have an engagement tonight with Miss Lacey—and I intend to have as many more as she will allow. That's a warning, Scott."

Webb felt his temper rise. "Don't try to threaten me, Rickabaugh."

The former gambler said, "Maybe I can make it plainer. Either you or I will have to go, in time, Scott. *I* intend to stay."

Webb shifted his right hand. Rickabaugh moved swiftly. Something hard slammed into Webb's belly. The eyes of the gunman were not a foot from Webb's.

"Don't draw on me," Rickabaugh said softly. "This derringer will open a hole in you big enough to stick a fist into." Webb did not move. Rickabaugh laughed, and withdrew the gun. "I didn't think you'd try anything. Good night, *Mr.* Scott."

Webb almost ran after him toward the Lacey cottage, his blood hot to spin the man about and smash him. But instead he turned toward town, feeling cold hate eat into him.

In the days that followed Webb saw how Rickabaugh had taken the attention of the town. Men who were normally law-abiding citizens went out of their way to talk to the ex-convict. Rickabaugh began to get more legal work, but for the time being the townspeople could talk of nothing else except the Holden-Dodge case. Old George Martin was still out of town, but Andy carried on for his father with a brilliance that promised a great career for him. Rickabaugh was thwarted at every turn by the frail little lawyer, and though applauded by the ne'er-do-wells, petty gamblers and bar flies in town, the ex-convict began to look bad as a lawyer.

He did not threaten Andy Martin again. But he began to do some big talking in the Miner's Rest.

Webb went out on a run to Barlow, lost a day there waiting for a new thoroughbrace to be hung on the coach, and got back to Placerita late in the evening. When he went into the Wells Fargo office, Sam Cass told him:

"There's been hell to pay, Webb. You'll hit the ceiling."

"What do you mean?"

"Young Andy Martin. He's dead."

"Dead?"

Cass leaned close to speak to Webb in a low tone. "He went into the Miner's Rest last night. Had a few drinks. Rickabaugh was in there. He began to bait Andy. And you know Andy had the body of a rabbit and the spirit of a lion. He and Rickabaugh began to argue. Andy made a fool of him, talking about law cases Rickabaugh never heard of. When Andy started to cough, and reached for a handkerchief, Rickabaugh shot him through the heart. Claimed Andy was drawing on him."

WEBB felt sick. "Andy never carried a weapon bigger than a penknife in his life."

"Yeah," Sam Cass sighed. "You know that. I know that. The whole damned town of Placerita knows that. But Rickabaugh didn't. Or so he says."

"What did Tim Lacey do?" Webb asked quickly.

"What the hell *could* he do? Charley Good and Sim Forest were witnesses. They say it looked as though Andy was going to draw on Rickabaugh."

"*Looked?* My God, Sam!"

"Anyway Tim had to say Rickabaugh was justified."

Webb shook his head, and Sam Cass asked, "What are you going to do about it, Webb?"

He did not answer. He left and headed for Tim Lacey's office. The marshal, standing beside the window, turned as the deputy came in.

"I reckon you've heard about Andy Martin?" he asked quietly.

"I have. What are you going to do about it?"

There were deep lines in Tim's face. "Rickabaugh can clear himself."

"For God's sake, Tim! What's happened to you?"

Lacey sat down and cut the tip from a cigar. "You know the unwritten law of the frontier as well as I do, Webb. He's in the clear."

"An ex-convict? A man who has killed ten men?"

Tim lit the cigar. "He's in the clear, I tell you."

Webb unpinned his badge and threw it on the desk. "Keep it this time," he growled. "I've had enough of this."

Tim looked at the badge. "I don't know what to do. He's been seeing Barbara regular."

"What does she think? Andy was her friend, too."

"I haven't been home since it happened. I stayed here last night." The marshal shoved the badge toward the deputy. "Take it back, son. I need you."

Webb turned on his heel and left the office. He went to the undertaker's where for a long time he stared at the thin, dead face of Andy Martin, his friend. By the guttering candles that made the dim parlor a place of shadows, it almost seemed as if Andy's lips moved, telling him something. Webb touched one of the cold hands, whispering a promise, and left the place.

He stood for another long time in the street, smoking. A piano tinkled in the Miner's Rest. A cowhand whistled *Billy Venero* as he swung down from his pony and hitched it in front of the saloon.

As Webb walked slowly to his boarding house, he wanted to kill Rickabaugh, even if he died himself. But Andy wouldn't have wanted it that way. He had had more guts in his crippled body than half a dozen whole men.

Never before had Webb realized how close he and Andy had been. Always Andy had seemed dependent on him, but now he knew how strong and loyal a friend the young lawyer had been. What he had lacked in physical strength he had more than made up for in strength of character.

[*Turn page*]

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Too good a man to have been killed by such an evil one.

For an hour Webb paced his room. How he wished now that he was a lawyer himself! Even if Andy's killer were cleared at the coroner's inquest he could have taken the Holden-Dodge case and beaten Rickabaugh—then killed him. Suddenly he hated Placerita and everybody in it for allowing such a man as Rickabaugh to become one of them.

A tap came at Webb's door. He opened it. Barbara Lacey stood in the hallway.

"May I come in, Webb?" she asked.

He stood aside for her. She turned as he closed the door. "You've heard about Andy, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen Father?"

"I turned in my badge an hour ago."

"Dad needs you, Webb."

"He let Rickabaugh get away with murdering Andy. I want no part of a law enforcement organization that would let a man like Rickabaugh get away with a crime like that."

She studied him. "You've changed a lot, Webb, since I first came home."

He mumbled, "Maybe I have."

"Is it because I have been seeing Bart?"

"No!" Suddenly he shook his head. "That isn't the truth. I *have* resented your seeing him. The whole truth is that I couldn't share you with any other man, least of all that cold-blooded killer."

SHE placed a hand on his arm. "Tonight I told him I never wanted to see him again. He was terribly angry, Webb."

"I supose he'll blame me for that, too."

Her eyes held his. "Are you afraid of him?"

"He's a mad dog. To be killed like one."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I don't know whether I'm afraid of him or not," he said glumly, "and no telling what you'll think of me for admitting a thing like that. He's a killer. Men have died under his guns."

"In fair fights?"

He looked at her quickly. "What do you mean?"

"Father once told me that most of those men with so many notches on their guns killed only when they had the odds. Rickabaugh is a gambler. He calculates the odds, and kills when they are in his favor."

Webb growled, "Easy enough for you to say that. You don't have to face him."

"Dad is facing him right now," she said unsteadily.

He gripped her arm and said again, "What do you mean?"

"Some of the townsmen—about a dozen of them—with Mr. Martin who just got back to town, went to see Dad. Mr. Martin is bitter. So are his friends. They're determined that Rickabaugh will not be allowed to get off on his flimsy excuse that he thought Andy meant to draw on him. They gave Dad an ultimatum—either arrest Bart or turn in his own badge."

Webb snatched up his hat.

"Where are you going?" she asked quickly.

"To get back my badge and help your father."

She suddenly came close to him. He kissed her. She said quietly, "I've been waiting for that."

Webb was out in the street before he fully realized that he *had* kissed her. He glanced back at his window. She was watching him. She raised her hand as he turned and hurried toward the marshal's office.

On the street men were converging on the Miner's Rest. One of them called to Webb:

"Tim Lacey is facing Bart Rickabaugh in the Miner's Rest!"

The board walk in front of the saloon was crowded. Men were peering through the windows or over the batwings. Webb shoved them aside and walked into the saloon. Men inside were standing with their backs against the walls—Andy's father, and other solid citizens. Bart Rickabaugh was at the end of the bar. Tim Lacey was midway down the counter, facing Rickabaugh.

"Come quietly, Bart," he was saying.

Rickabaugh leaned easily on the bar.

Andy's father was watching him, his face set.

"Keep back, Lacey," Rickabaugh said quietly to the marshal, "Don't rile me."

Tim moved closer. "You'll get a fair shake," he said.

"What's wrong with this town?" sneered the ex-convict. "Martin tried to draw on me. I shot in self-defense. There isn't a court in this territory that would condemn me for that."

"Andy Martin never carried a gun in his life," the marshal said flatly.

"I didn't know that."

Abe Gaddis, the local liveryman, standing beside old Martin, said, "Rickabaugh, I told you just before you drew that Andy never carried a gun."

Rickabaugh did not take his eyes from the marshal. He said to Gaddis out of the corner of his mouth, "You're a liar."

"I'll swear to it in court!" shouted Abe.

Rickabaugh looked at him then. His eyes were as cold as a shark's. "*Maybe* you will."

"Arrest him, Marshal!" pleaded George Martin.

"Don't move," said Rickabaugh.

Tim walked forward. Rickabaugh leaped back. His hands went down and came up. A Colt flamed in his right hand just as Tim slapped down for a draw. Tim jerked, and staggered out into the center of the room. The Colt flamed again. Tim turned slowly and fell on a table.

Webb drew his own Colt then and ran forward. Rickabaugh laughed.

"The deputy marshal," he sneered, and fired again. The slug plucked at Webb's hat.

Rickabaugh saw Abe Gaddis draw a derringer, swung his six-shooter and fired. Gaddis cursed and gripped his shoulder. As Rickabaugh leaped backward through the powdersmoke his next shot smashed the big hanging lamp in the middle of the ceiling. Oil dripped to the floor and flickered up. Men dived under tables. A derringer cracked in Rickabaugh's hand then, its deadly little slug missing Webb by inches.

[*Turn page*]

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RICKABAUGH kicked open a rear door and leaped through it, and as Webb raced toward it a slug smashed through the panel. Just in time Webb darted to one side.

Men were shouting and cursing in the dim room, lit now only by fire flickering in the middle of the floor.

A man kneeling beside Tim Lacey said, "I think he's dying."

Webb ran for the front door as men scattered before him. At the corner of the building, he took a quick look and ducked back as a slug from Rickabaugh's gun whispered past.

Webb heard the man running and risked another look. He caught only a glimpse of a shadow at the end of the alley, moving toward the abandoned old storage house of the Placerita Merchandise Company. Webb tore after it in a weaving run, firing twice as he went. A laugh followed the quick reports. Feet slammed against the hard earth of the alley as men raced around the corner behind Webb.

"Where is he?" a bull voice shouted.

"In the warehouse, I think!" Webb yelled back. He reloaded his Colt. "Anybody want to go in with me?"

Sudden silence. Men looked at each other. Then one man's high-pitched voice that cracked, wavered, "Against Bart Rickabaugh? Not me. I got a wife and two kids at home."

Old Martin jerked the man's Colt from holster. "I'll go with you, Webb!" he called.

Webb shook his head. "No! You wouldn't have a chance."

"Why't you get him alone, Scott?" someone jibed. "You're deputy marshal."

"He's afraid!" yelled another. "Rickabaugh's too good for him or any other man in town!"

Webb growled, "Men like you made a damned hero out of him! Out of a killer! All right. I'll go after him."

He crossed the alley and slipped into the shadows of a shed, then moved slowly toward the old warehouse. It had sagged enough to keep the door from being fully closed. Suddenly he ran to the wall of the building and flattened himself against it, edging along until he stood close by the door. A board creaked inside.

"Rickabaugh!" Webb called. "Give yourself up!"

A shot blasted, the bullet slapping into the sagging door. Webb felt cold sweat soak his shirt. His Colt handle was greasy with sweat. He kicked at the door, and the gun cracked again. As the slug whined past him he darted in and dropped to the floor as the killer's Colt spat fire five times in a staccato roll. Powdersmoke drifted over Webb.

The flashes had come from the back of the warehouse. The deputy crawled behind a pile of lumber. He knew there was a smaller room at the back of the warehouse where valuable merchandise had been kept. It was windowless, and fastened by a heavy door with bar and chain lock. There was no other door at the rear. If Rickabaugh wanted to get out he had to do it through the front door. Webb heard the heavy door back there move, and heard creaking boards.

He stood up and padded forward, close to the wall, feeling carefully with each foot before he put it down. It was pitch dark in the back of the warehouse. He stopped behind a heavy roof prop and waited.

What was going on in Rickabaugh's mind? He wondered. Did the man remember the Snake Den at Yuma Penitentiary? Webb knew about that place where the most recalcitrant of the hardcases in Yuma were kept chained to the walls in semi-darkness. Rickabaugh would know the Snake Den. He'd had no time off for good behavior. He had served his full twenty years. Twenty years of heat and hell would burn the fire out of a man and make him a hollow shell of his former self!

Webb worked his way to the heavy door of the storage room. His groping hand touched the chain once used to padlock the door. In his memory of all he'd heard about the stifling Snake Den the jingle and clank of the chains on the prisoners stood out. He edged back, placing the

thick wall between him and Rickabaugh. He touched the chain. It rattled. Something moved in the room. "Get back!" growled Rickabaugh. "Or I'll blast you."

"Remember the Snake Den, Bart?" Webb asked quietly. "The heat? The stink of stale sweat? The filthy floor? The chains, Bart— the chains." Webb rattled the chains.

"Get back, you spawn of hell!" yelled Bart's thick voice. "Get back out of there!"

Webb waited. He touched the chain again.

"Did you see the faces of the men you'd killed staring at you from the corners of the Snake Den throughout the long black nights, Bart? The Porter brothers? Tiburcio Padilla? Nine of them, Bart. Even if you get away from *me* you'll have two more faces added to the group. Tim Lacey and Andy Martin."

"Shut up, damn you! Damn you to hell!"

"It's pitch dark in there, Bart. Can you see the faces?"

WEBB rattled the chain and jumped back. Two shots flamed in the darkness and slapped into the wall opposite the door. Webb flattened himself against the back wall.

"You can't shoot *those* faces, Bart. All the Colt thunder in the world won't rub them out in the long dark nights ahead."

Rickabaugh was breathing harshly. Webb cocked his Colt. The break would come soon now. Rickabaugh moved.

"What do you want, Scott?" the killer asked thickly.

"Throw out your guns. Come out with your hands up."

"I'm coming out!" the killer screamed. "When I do it'll be shooting!"

"Throw out your guns—now. I'll promise you a fair trial."

Minutes drifted past. Webb was just about to go in when something hit the floor at his feet. He touched it. A double-barreled derringer. A minute later something else thudded against the floor. A Colt. Webb stepped back. Rickabaugh's breath was rasping just inside the door.

[*Turn page*]

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"For God's sake, Scott," he panted, "let's get out of here! Let's get out to the light!"

Webb shoved his Colt muzzle into Rickabaugh's back. The killer walked hurriedly to the door. He stepped out into the alley. Farther down the alley a score of men were standing. Rickabaugh walked toward them and stopped in the light from a window. His face was pasty white, and dewed with sweat. "For God's sake, Webb," yelled Sam Cass, the Wells Fargo agent, "how did you do it?"

"Take him to the calabozo," Webb said to two men. "Lock him up."

He walked past the shaken killer and into the saloon. Tim Lacey lay on a table, stripped to the waist. Doc MacLean was probing his left shoulder.

"He'll live," MacLean said.

Barbara Lacey came close to Webb. He put his arm around her.

George Martin came forward. "That was the bravest thing I ever saw a man do," he said shakily.

Sim Forest, who had been Rickabaugh's biggest hero-worshiper, scratched his jaw, "Rickabaugh didn't have a mark on him, Webb."

Webb drew out his colt and emptied it on the table. Six cartridges lay there.

Forest whistled. "Who was shooting?"

"Rickabaugh," said Webb. "He was a dangerous man in front of a crowd, in the light. Darkness, memories, and nerves did more damage to him than bullets could have done."

"I don't get it," said Charley Good.

Webb smiled. "He was a hero to a lot of you. The tough gunman, with ten notches on his gun. He had us all fooled, and I've got to confess that means me, too. But he was a shell of the tough killer who went to Yuma twenty years ago."

Charley looked at Webb queerly. "You ain't talking sense, to me."

"That's because you haven't got any sense," Tim Lacey said quietly. He looked up at Webb. "I knew all along you'd never run from him, son."

Barbara smiled. Webb gripped her hand. "I had a reason," he said softly. ● ● ●

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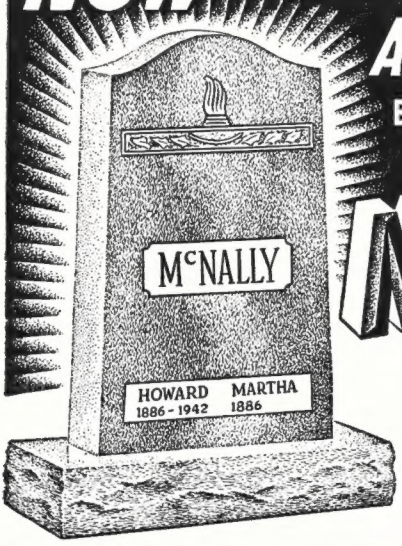

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